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Choice

REVEALED:
The 10 3D
Blu-rays you
must own!



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Illuminate your
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Beyond HD!

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55IN screen cuts the cost of Ultra Hi-Def technology

Plus LG's plans for OLED TV domination

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Yamaha soundbar

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TEN GEAR GUIDE → CURVED OLED TV ARRIVES IN THE UK → XBOX ONE DETAILS

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ISSUE 226 NOVEMBER 2013 £4.50
AUS- \$9.99 NZ- \$12.99 CAN- \$12.50



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Distributed in the UK by Seymour Distribution Ltd

TEST WALL IMAGES:
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HOME CINEMA CHOICE, ISSN 1359-4276, is published 13 times per year (twice in May) by AVTech
Media Ltd a division of MYTIMEMEDIA LTD, c/o USACAN Media Corp, at 123A Distribution Way
Building H-1, Suite 104, Plattsburgh, NY 12901. Periodicals postage paid at Plattsburgh, NY.
POSTMASTER: send address changes to HOME CINEMA CHOICE, c/o Express Mag, P.O. BOX
2769, Plattsburgh, NY, U.S.A. 12901-0239.



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WELCOME

Our cover star this issue, Samsung's 55in F9000 series Ultra HD TV, retails for around £3,300 – only £700 more than the launch price of the brand's flagship 55in Full HD model, the F8000, back in July. By my maths, this means buyers of the next-gen set are getting those extra 6,220,800 pixels for around 0.011p each. That's a bargain.



In fact, **there are bargains to be had everywhere in the AV world**: sub £100 Blu-ray players, £500 networkable AV receivers (see p63) and multichannel speaker packages for less than the price of a new games console. Software is increasingly affordable, too. What should you do with all that saved cash, though? The answer is simple – blow it on a high-end Smart lighting system! As we report on p22, integrated illumination brings performance benefits to your setup and creates a stunning ambience that will make movie nights even more memorable. This is what I'm hoarding my pennies for. And a 4K TV, of course...

Mark Craven
Editor



MENU



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The UK's most experienced TV tester cut his teeth as an early HCC staffer

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P R I M A R E

BD32: "PICTURE MARVEL"



"I'm saving up for a Primare, no question...the BD32 provides the sort of entertainment levels that most commercial cinemas would be proud of."

Home Cinema Choice 206



"...the Primare portrayed BD movies such as Avatar with spectacular picture fidelity...upscaled DVDs looked fabulous too...with boldly saturated colours, negligible visible noise and minimal motion artefacts. The BD32 is a class act."

Hi Fi News, February 2012



BULLETIN

→ **News Highlights** **SAMSUNG** Curved OLED TV touches down in the UK **CAMBRIDGE AUDIO** Aero loudspeakers mix modern technology with classic design **MICROSOFT** What to expect from Xbox One's live TV functionality **BRITISH FILM INSTITUTE** Smart TV app unlocks a gateway to history **MAN OF STEEL** Full details on the year's most heroic Blu-ray blockbuster **AND MUCH MORE!**

Radius revamped

Monitor Audio Radius loudspeakers → www.monitoraudio.co.uk



Monitor Audio has revamped its Radius speaker range. The compact cabinets, first launched ten years ago, have been updated to include all-metal drivers for both midbass and tweeter units. Alongside overhauled Radius 45 (£200/pair), 90 (£350/pair) and 270 (£700/pair) designs, the eight-strong lineup includes slimmed-down versions of the 225 centre (£275) and Radius ONE soundbar (£500), together with a new Radius 200 centre speaker (£200) and two active subs, the Radius 380 (£500) and Radius 390 (£600).

HCC ONLINE...

Looking for breaking AV news, blogs, features, & reviews? For your daily fix visit us at www.homecinemachoice.com Follow us on Twitter @hccmag

Samsung throws OLED curve ball

Samsung S9C → www.samsung.com/uk



Samsung has outpaced rival manufacturer LG and released the first curved OLED TV – its S9C – into the UK market. While we might not agree with Samsung UK's Head of TV Guy Kinnell when he describes the curved screen technology as 'like bringing home an IMAX theatre that you can enjoy every day' (see p81), there's no denying that it still packs some serious wow factor. Another neat trick is that the S9C allows two viewers to watch different Full HD video material on the same screen using the brand's Active 3D spex with built-in stereo speakers.

Slim-line speakers



KEF is taking on the soundbar market with the first release from its new V Series. Priced at £700, the V300 digital TV sound system consists of two 35mm slim-line speakers designed to flank a flatpanel TV, plus a compact 'activation module' that handles the amplification. The speakers feature four 4.5in patented ultra-slim bass drivers and two 1in aluminium tweeters with KEF's unique 'tangerine' waveguide. While the V300s ship with desk stands, optional floor stands are available for £225 per pair. www.kef.com

New Generation TV



Bang & Olufsen has given last year's BeoVision 12-65 plasma TV a refresh and come up with the BeoVision 12-65 New Generation. Promising to set 'new standards for combining picture and sound', the new 12-65 includes its own 7.1-channel audio module, allowing owners to hook speakers directly into the TV without the need for an AVR. It also employs new Truelmage tech to automatically up- or downmix audio to suit the number of speakers in your setup. Prices start at a little over £12,000. www.bang-olufsen.com

Better than a 'bar'?



Q Acoustics has added a new model to its loudspeaker range, the Bluetooth wireless Q-BT3. Priced £400 per pair, these bookshelf speakers stand 240mm tall and feature a 2 x 50W power amp, Bluetooth wireless receiver, a 1in silk dome tweeter and 4in coated paper cone midbass driver. Curiously, the brand is positioning the speaker as a potential soundbar competitor: 'Connect it to the audio output from your TV or STB and the Q-BT3 comfortably outperforms typical soundbars,' is the claim. www.qacoustics.co.uk

BMR bubbles up in Aeros

Cambridge Audio loudspeakers mix modern tech and classic design

Cambridge Audio recently set up shop in London's landmark Sister Ray record store to unveil its new five-strong range of Aero loudspeakers.

The Aero 5 centre speaker (£250) matches a 2in BMR (Balanced Mode Radiator) with two custom 5.25in midbass drivers, while the Aero 9 subwoofer (£450) boasts a 500W Class D amplifier and two 10in drivers – one front-firing, the other a down-firing auxiliary passive cone. As for the Aero 3 rear surrounds (£300/pair), these feature twin 4in BMR drivers and can be configured as a dual monopole or bipolar speaker, allowing you to create a 7.1 system with just a 5.1 speaker array.

Rounding out the range are the Aero 2 bookshelf/standmount (£350/pair), featuring a 2.25in BMR driver and a custom-designed 6in midbass driver, and the floorstanding Aero 6 (£650/pair), which adds an extra 6in midbass driver.

Coherence and convenience

The use of BMR drivers across the line-up comes from Cambridge Audio's experience with the technology in its Minx range – and the



Dominic Baker: 'The idea of using a single rear to give you 5.1 from four speakers is actually quite convenient'

company is keen to stress the advantages it claims that this gives the Aero range over the competition. 'To make a good midbass unit you have to reach a compromise about how much bass output you actually get. So the majority of two-way bookshelf speakers will be tuned at 50-55Hz,' revealed Cambridge Audio's Audio Systems Business Director Dominic Baker when HCC caught up with him at the launch.

'By letting the BMR driver handle the mid-range we could start optimising the bass driver for horsepower. The Aeros are tuned at 42Hz. So you've basically gained half an octave of bass compared to a conventional two-way speaker.'

Baker also posits the notion that the Aero 3 speaker can simplify a surround setup. 'The idea of using a single Aero 3 rear to give you 5.1 sound from four speakers and a subwoofer is actually quite convenient. After all, there are a lot of people whose rooms have doors or windows that preclude the use of two rear speakers.'

While the tech inside the Aeros may be fairly radical, the wood-finished cabinets are far more traditional in design. But as Baker says, 'You can burn up an awful lot of money dreaming up new cabinet designs with no audible benefit.'

'What really matters in the sound quality.'

The use of BMR technology enables the Aero speakers to 'gain half an octave of bass'



PLAYLIST...

Team HCC spins up its disc picks of the month

Lost Girl: Season 2 (R2 DVD)

An ancient evil makes life tricky for Bo and her friends in the second season of this fun supernatural series pitched somewhere between *Buffy...* and *True Blood*



Spring Breakers (Region B BD/R2 DVD)



Keep the Summer party going with this hi-def platter's eye-searing psychedelic 1080p visuals and lossless 5.1 dubstep soundtrack

Olympus Has Fallen (Region B BD)



The perfect antidote to the dismal *A Good Day to Die Hard*, this dumb but fun flick is a must-see Blu-ray for all action junkies

Doctor Who: The Ice Warriors (R2 DVD)



Yet another incomplete *Doctor Who* serial has its two missing episodes animated for this fab DVD outing

Populaire (Region B BD)



This witty French twist on the traditional Hollywood rom-com looks utterly gorgeous in hi-def

EXTRAS...

Small items that make a big impression

Star Wars: The Blueprints



Blueprints for sets and vehicles created for the *Star Wars* movies may sound like the ultimate in nerdiness,

but this stunning £60 hardback proves an engrossing behind-the-scenes look at the creation of George Lucas' sci-fi saga.

Game of Thrones: Music from Season 3



While it draws a little too heavily on the first two seasons, there's still plenty to savour in this CD of 19 tracks from Ramin Djawadi's epic score.

Elysium: The Art of the Film



This fascinating £25 companion to Neill Blomkamp's sci-fi flick stands proud as one of the best 'Art of...' books Titan has published to date.

Treme: Stories & Recipes from New Orleans



This £19 cookbook celebrates the cuisine of New Orleans and boasts more than 100 authentic recipes for

you to cook up and enjoy while watching *Season Three* on Blu-ray.

Microsoft's great X-pectations

Is the tide finally turning for the beleaguered Xbox One games console?

Whether it's down to stock shortages or hardware glitches, few videogames consoles ever experience a completely smooth launch. But none have ever been on the receiving end of quite as much ire as Microsoft's Xbox One following its official reveal back in May.

News that the console would require users to be 'always online', and that DRM restrictions would limit the ability to rent, lend or resell games, caused so much uproar that Microsoft was forced to perform a u-turn on these ideas less than a month later. Since then the company has gone into a publicity overdrive, shifting the focus to gaming and managing to win over many consumers along the way. The fact that every European Xbox One pre-order will come with a free copy of EA's *FIFA 14* has, predictably, gone down extremely well. As has the announcement of a *Call of Duty: Ghosts* console bundle (promising 'special bonus content') for the Xbox One's launch in November. As far as gaming goes, it simply doesn't get any bigger than these two franchises.

Entertainment hub

Gaming was also the primary focus of Microsoft UK's recent Xbox One 'first look' event, where attendees (including HCC) got to watch and play demos of *Ryse: Son of Rome*, *Dead Rising 3*, *Project Spark* and more.

Putting down the control pad for a while, HCC chatted with Microsoft UK's Xbox Marketing Director Harvey



Harvey Eagle: 'The Xbox One has been designed from the ground up to handle a multitude of entertainment functions'

Eagle, and soon got to the topic of what the system's much-hyped Live TV functionality will actually consist of at launch in the UK.

Early rumours of the Xbox One being a super-charged set-top box are currently a little off the mark. 'There are some features that are going to be available at launch and some things that are going to develop over time', Eagle told us. 'At launch what you'll get with Live TV is the ability to connect your STB through HDMI into the Xbox One. This will allow you to access the content on that box through the Xbox One's dashboard, without having to fiddle around with inputs or switching devices.'

The future may hold more for Live TV on Xbox One, but the only thing that Eagle was willing to divulge was the planned development of the Xbox One Guide, which it's intended will become a catch-all hub for your media. 'It's essentially an EPG that aggregates all of your different feeds of content in one place in your Xbox.'

However, there is no timetable planned for this development, so for now, think of the Xbox One as a next-gen games console – and HDMI switcher...



Forza Motorsport 5 (left) is one of the Xbox One's key launch exclusives

Onkyo unveils a trio of soundbars

Brand declares war on 'atrocious' TV sound

Onkyo has announced the release of three new soundbar products while simultaneously taking a few pot-shots at TV manufacturers.

'It's really not that surprising that the sound quality of today's TVs is so atrocious. The slimmer TV screens become, the harder it is to squeeze substantial and effective speaker drive units into them', states the company.

The new lineup consists of the three-way LS-B40 soundbar (£300), the two-way LS-B50 soundbar with wireless 40W active subwoofer (£450) and the LS-T10 TV speaker system (£350, pictured). Both the LS-B40 and the LS-B50 pack eight drivers



(two bass woofers, four mid-range drivers, and two tweeters for the former; six full-range and two tweeters for the latter). The LS-T10 utilises a pedestal design and features six full-range drivers, plus a 21W subwoofer in its underbelly.

The LS-T10 and LS-B50 are due at the end September, with the LS-B40 following a month later.

Onkyo's LS-T10 sound pedestal incorporates a 21W downward-firing subwoofer in addition to its six full-range drivers

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“OPPO's BDP-103EU is a state-of-the-art Blu-ray player, matching a luxurious, heavyweight build quality with an astonishing range of features. In addition to two HDMI outputs, external sources can take advantage of the player's high-grade processing via its twin HDMI inputs, while USB, Ethernet and Wi-Fi capability make it easy to play back your own media files. As a universal deck, the OPPO will happily spin Super Audio CDs and DVD-Audio discs as well as Blu-rays – its performance, aided by extensive user adjustments, is sublime. 4K upscaling and HDMI passthrough mean it can be combined with the latest high-end displays at the heart of a home cinema.”

NETWORK-ENABLED
FEATURES:

NETFLIX



You Tube



Blu-ray



www.oppo-bluray.co.uk

DIARY

Our calendar ensures that you don't miss out...

→ SEPTEMBER

25: **Homeland: Season Two**

Things get even more complicated for former CIA agent Carrie Mathison as the second season of this tense US drama arrives on Blu-ray and DVD in the UK.

www.fox.co.uk

25: **CEDIA Expo 2013**

The Colorado Convention Center in Denver plays host to this four-day AV trade show offering product demos alongside educational conferences and seminars.

www.cedia.net/expo



27: **The Wicker Man**

The cult British horror film celebrates its 40th anniversary with a limited run at UK cinemas in advance

of its highly-anticipated Blu-ray debut on October 14.

www.studiocanal.co.uk

30: **Lifeorce**

Arrow Video gives Tobe Hooper's space vampire shocker an injection of fresh blood with a two-disc BD release boasting two versions of the film and a plethora of extra features – including three commentaries and the UK-exclusive *Cannon Fodder: The Making of Lifeorce* documentary.

www.arrowfilms.co.uk

→ OCTOBER

07: **Epic 3D**

Have the creators of the *Ice Age* films conjured up yet another magical treat for fans of stereoscopic visuals? Find out as their latest CG animated blockbuster hits 3D BD.

www.fox.co.uk

11: **Machete Kills**



Danny Trejo returns to a cinema near you as former Mexican Fedale Machete in this typically tongue-in-cheek grindhouse sequel from director Robert Rodriguez.

www.lionsgatefilms.co.uk

15: **Smart Building Conference**

London's state-of-the-art Dexter House is the venue for this series of industry presentations aimed at bringing forward 'the future of Smart Buildings to the present.'

www.smartbuildingconference.com

17: **HCC #227**

Your favourite home cinema mag hits the stands today, packed with hardware tests, features, opinion and in-depth software reviews.

www.homecinemachoice.com

BFI app unlocks the past

Explore a century of British filmmaking on Samsung's Smart TV service

The latest cutting-edge connected TV tech is now being utilised to allow viewers to dig deep into the history of British filmmaking, thanks to the latest fruits of an ongoing partnership between Samsung and the British Film Institute.

The BFI Smart TV App gives users free access to exclusive content (both new and old) from the BFI's archives. The app includes seven channels and promises to showcase a diverse range of content from film features and shorts, interviews, documentaries and the BFI London Film Festival.

Explaining the app's exclusivity to Samsung's Smart TV platform, Edward Humphrey, Digital Director, BFI told *HCC*: 'Samsung and the BFI share many values and the BFI app is another step along the evolution of our partnership. We're delighted that Samsung shares our passion for content and wanting to ensure that as many people as possible get a chance to discover the incredible world of film that we curate and create.'

Edwardian channel surfing

Content is varied. The *Highlights* channel showcases interviews with stars such as Joss Whedon, John Travolta and Ridley Scott; *Films of the Week* has already played host to the likes of Peter Greenaway's *A Zed and Two Noughts* and Martin Scorsese's episode of *Century of Cinema*; *Beginnings* is devoted to early short films by notable directors and actors



Edward Humphrey: 'We hope that the BFI app will stand apart through the unique, inspiring films that we programme onto it'

such as Shane Meadows, Ken Russell and Daniel Craig; *BFI*

London Film Festival promises 'inside footage' from the festival; *In Conversation* hosts videos from the BFI programme of interviews and on-stage events; and *Insights* is home to a selection of BFI documentaries.

However, the real star of the service right now is the *Treasures from the Archive* channel. Here you can delve into a wealth of the UK's National Collection on film, curated by experts at the BFI National Archive. Amongst the archive material on offer is an early Audrey Hepburn screen test and a Mitchell and Kenyon playlist exclusively curated for Samsung (including a Punch and Judy show shot in 1901

and film of Blackpool's Victoria Pier recorded in 1904). Naturally, the picture quality of these early clips is hardly *Avatar*-esque, but there's no denying their appeal to films buffs.

Humphrey sums up the app's launch as 'a key step in realising the BFI's ambitions for a wider suite of on-demand services, connecting UK audiences with our amazing content.' He also hinted to us that there will be further announcements in the coming months regarding the BFI's 'next steps.'



Explore over 100 years of British cinema history with the BFI's new Smart TV app

Serious soundbar



With its £1,000 price tag, Monitor Audio's new ASB-2 soundbar finds itself going

head-to-head with the likes of the Sonos PlayBar and Bose Cinemate ISR. Thankfully, the ASB-2 has plenty of tricks up its sleeve to justify its pricing, including onboard HDMI switching as well as Wi-Fi and AirPlay compatibility. The 'bar' employs six proprietary C-CAM drivers – two 5.5in woofers, two 4in mid-range units and two 1in tweeters. Meanwhile, five discrete power amp stages combine to provide 160W of grunt.

www.monitoraudio.co.uk

Jongo family expands



UK audio specialist Pure has expanded its Jongo multiroom music system with

a trio of wireless speakers. The 100W Jongo T6 (£300) features two hand-tuned 5.25in full-range drivers, while the 50W T4 (£200) and 20W T2 (£130) boast twin 4in and 3in drivers respectively. For those of you with more aesthetic concerns, swappable coloured covers are also available, with prices starting at £13. Pure has also launched a new higher-tier on-demand music streaming service, Pure Connect Violet, priced £9.99 per month.

www.pure.com

One hole fits all



UK distributor The Mutli-Room Company has added Russound's new Acclaim range of thin bezel in-wall and

in-ceiling speakers to its product lineup. Four Russound Speaker Flat (RSF) models are available, with flat position drivers and pivoting tweeters. The range also includes three Russound Speaker Angled (RSA) models, where the bass driver is angled 15 degrees. To make installation easier, every speaker in the Acclaim lineup has identical cut-out requirements, ensuring that one hole template fits all models.

www.multi-room.com

This month's top 10 news stories in handy, bite-sized chunks...



1 A golden opportunity

PMC is running a 'Golden Ticket' promotion on its Twenty series models until October 31. Any UK consumer who buys a Twenty series product from an authorised PMC dealer in September or October will be handed a Golden Ticket that allows them to be entered into a random draw for the month in question – with the two lucky winners receiving the purchase price of their speakers from PMC. 'This is our way of saying thank you,' says managing director Miles Roberts. For more info visit www.pmc-speaker.com.

2 Foxtel drops 3D

Broadcast 3D suffered another setback as Foxtel closed its 3D channel in Australia. The Pay TV service cited recent similar moves by the BBC and ESPN, plus a lack of audience interest in the technology.

3 Video industry boost

Figures released by the BVA (British Video Association) at the end of July show that the value of the UK video entertainment market during the first half of 2013 reached £993 million, up 8.2 per cent on the same period last year. *Skyfall* proved to be the best-selling release over the period – but we were more excited to see that *Dredd* made it to ninth place in the rankings.

4 Sky and BBC back 4K body

Representatives from BSkyB and the BBC will co-chair a new industry group designed to promote Ultra HD TV in the UK. The UK UHD Forum has been launched by the Digital TV Group and is described as a vital step in avoiding the 'confusion still experienced by consumers to this day over HD Ready.'

5 300GB discs in the works

Sony and Panasonic have revealed that they are working together on the development of a next-generation optical disc format with a storage capacity of 'at least 300GB'. While this is primarily aimed at the professional market, it's not hard to see how a disc with six times the capacity of Blu-ray could be useful in the consumer market when it comes to 4K content.

6 Crestron finds London home

AV control and automation specialist Crestron is opening its first London showroom. Located in the Design Centre Chelsea Harbour, the showroom will present the entire Crestron range to interior designers, architects, integrators and end-users, and it will also play host to October's Crestron Residential Integration Awards. 'A true home for Crestron in London is long overdue,' stated Vice President of Crestron International Robin van Meeuwen. 'We've been waiting for the right site, right time and right team. We've definitely got that in Chelsea.'

7 Sony preps IPTV service

The Wall Street Journal reports that Sony is on the verge of striking a deal to secure content from Viacom to show on a new IPTV service that will stream live TV across the internet. The publication's anonymous source says that Sony is hoping to launch the service on the PS4 and Bravia TVs early next year.

8 Back to film

J.J. Abrams has confirmed that he will not be following in the digital footsteps of George Lucas, and will instead shoot his *Star Wars* sequel on Kodak 35mm film.

9 Pay TV market growing

New research by Futuresource Consulting indicates that the global Pay TV set-top box market continues to grow, with demand expected to peak at 180 million units in 2016. While 'demand for Pay TV STBs in developed markets is predominantly saturated,' the move to more advanced, higher-priced STBs in those regions is still having a positive impact on revenues.

10 Game on (again)

With all the fuss about the Xbox One and PS4, you may not have noticed that another console has just launched in the UK. PlayJam's USB flash drive-sized GameStick retails for just £80 and ships with a Bluetooth controller. Simply plug the Android-powered GameStick into an HDMI port on your TV and you can download (via Wi-Fi) 100s of games you usually play on your tablet or smartphone.

The dinky GameStick console is the size of a USB flash drive



PREMIERE

What's happening in the world of TV and films...

Batfleck begins

The news that Ben Affleck has been cast as a 'new incarnation' of Batman in Zack Snyder's as-yet-untitled *Man of Steel* follow-up has prompted plenty of ire among Bat-fans. But it's worth noting that Warner Bros. received more than 50,000 complaints about Michael Keaton's casting back in 1988 – and look how that turned out.

Faster and fierouser



While we're miffed to learn that HCC favourite Justin Lin has been replaced by James Wan as the director of next Summer's *Fast & Furious 7*, we've been placated somewhat by the news that both Kurt Russell and Thai martial arts legend Tony 'Ong-Bak' Jaa have joined the cast.

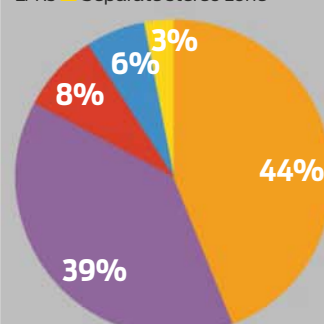
Marvel-ous news

Channel 4 has nabbed the UK TV rights to Joss Whedon's *Avengers Assemble* spin-off *Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.* The series launches this Autumn, shortly after its US debut.

WE ASKED...

What do you use the sixth and seventh channels on your AVR for?

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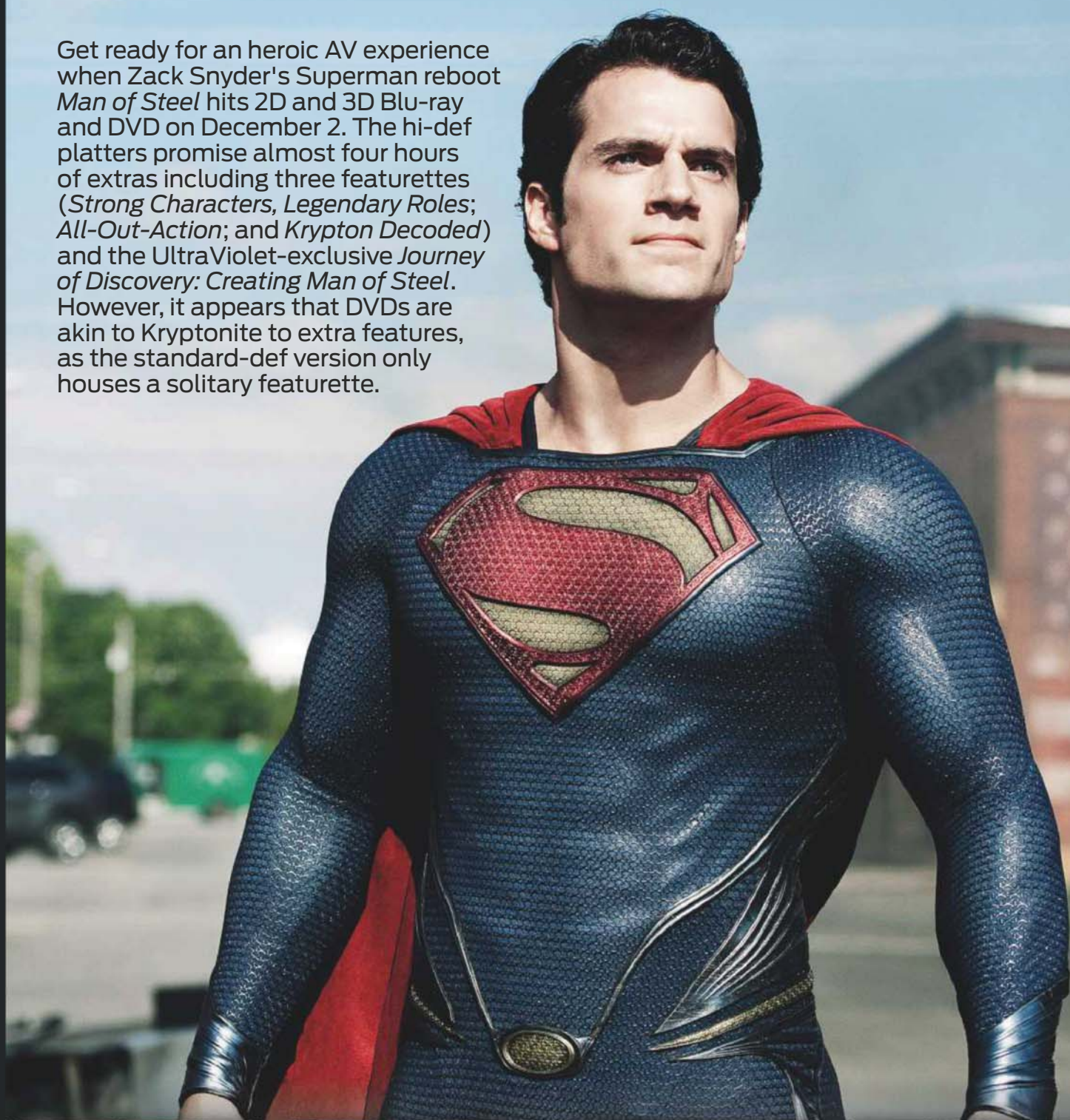


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Big Blue goes Blu

Man of Steel → Warner Home Video → All-region BD/R2 DVD

Get ready for an heroic AV experience when Zack Snyder's Superman reboot *Man of Steel* hits 2D and 3D Blu-ray and DVD on December 2. The hi-def platters promise almost four hours of extras including three featurettes (*Strong Characters, Legendary Roles; All-Out-Action; and Krypton Decoded*) and the UltraViolet-exclusive *Journey of Discovery: Creating Man of Steel*. However, it appears that DVDs are akin to Kryptonite to extra features, as the standard-def version only houses a solitary featurette.



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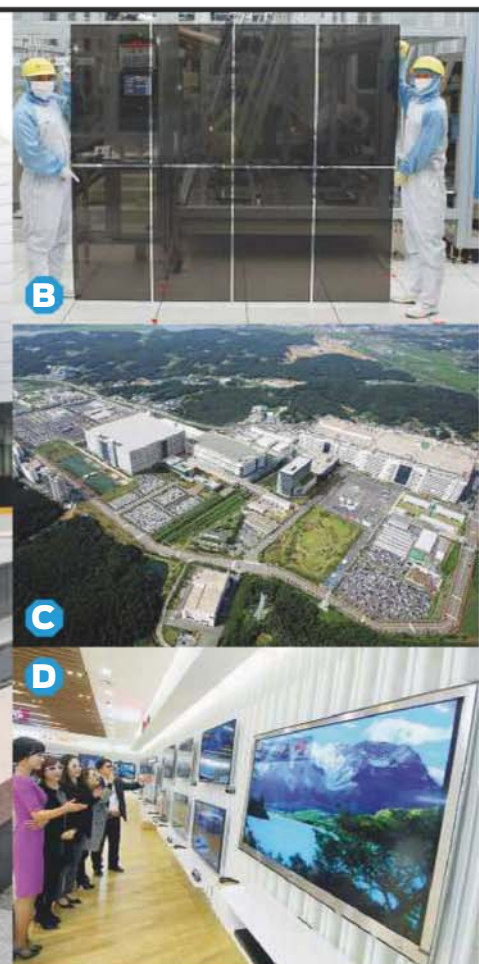
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OLED FINALLY READY FOR PRIMETIME

From face creams to flatscreens, LG is determined to take the lead in fancy TV tech. **Steve May** travels to Seoul to learn more

THE ERA OF OLED has dawned. In truth, this particular epoch has been a long time coming, but LG at least is convinced that TV's fabled technology is finally ready for primetime. The brand's debut 55in OLED screen is available in limited quantities to actually buy, and a sensational curved iteration, the 55EA980W, circles in the wings. To learn more about LG's TV timetable, *HCC* travelled to the brand's home town of Seoul, South Korea, for a tour of its Twin Towers HQ, and some quality time with its top brass.

Samsung may be the world's biggest TV vendor, but LG is closing in fast. Indeed, when it comes to

new developments it's already stolen a march. The company was first to market with 4K TV, and to date is the only one to make commercial headway with OLED.

This success has led to LG setting itself some bold targets. UK CE Commercial Director Andrew Mackay confides a plan to take ownership of a quarter of all the key TV sectors: 3D, Smart internet-connected TV and the 'over £500 sector.' His goal is to be the number one TV brand come 2015. Given the pace that LG is moving, that's not as outlandish as you might think. 'It's all possible,' encourages the company's new slogan.

Thomas Lee, LG's VP of Home Entertainment, is the first to admit that OLED has been a challenge

to mass-produce, with disastrous yields holding back worldwide introductions. Lee keeps numbers close to his chest, but says the 'yield situation is improving.' As evidence, the company recently began shipping OLED panels to the States.

OLED's picture performance has been similarly boosted. Parked in the product showroom of LG's Seocho R&D campus, the brand's 55in OLED looks particularly spectacular. The slightly pixelated appearance seen on early OLED samples has been replaced with crisp definition, insanely vibrant colours and impenetrable blacks. And, of course, the



astounding thinness of the display (only 4mm) still elicits gasps of amazement.

According to Lee, the set's dynamism is due to LG's unique WRGB panel production process, which adds around two-million more white sub pixels, giving greater delineation. He says it also makes for a 'better match with the REC.709 colour space standard.'

Of course, there's a heavy price to be paid for all the investment and invention poured into OLED. The 55in 55EM960V sells for £10,000. That's a lot of Kimchee by anyone's reckoning. When pushed on just how long it will take for the technology to fall in price, I'm told roughly two years. By then a 55in panel could be selling for around £3,000, speculates Lee.

OLED's protracted birth has put the technology slightly out of step with recent developments in 4K; all LG's next-gen screens to date have been Full HD. Thomas Lee admits that the brand is now fast-tracking 4K OLED, a development given added impetus by the Panasonic and Sony 56in OLED UHD prototypes shown at this year's CES. You can tell the subject is a bit of a sore point. Almost as an aside he declares: 'LG will not be beaten by other manufacturers when it comes to producing 4K OLED UHD. We will be first.' Being first is a mantra you hear continually within the Twin Towers. It drives every aspect of the business. In the meantime, LG is concentrating its 4K UHD offensive around LCD. This is one area where there are no problems with either yield or production capacity.

The Great Korean bake-off

LG Display's panel-making facility in Paju, located several hours outside of Seoul, overlooks North

Korean territory. In the Success Tower, an informal observation deck atop one of the buildings, telescopes are provided for visitors to peer at its bellicose neighbour.

The Paju facility itself sprawls city-like and security is on par with Area 51. However, I'm afforded the opportunity to take a window tour. Huge substrates are deftly handled by robotic arms and baked into existence. There's barely any human

'LG will not be beaten by other manufacturers when it comes to producing 4K OLED. We will be first'

intervention within Paju's cleanest of clean rooms. This is just as well, as the process smells awful. The manufacture of LCD panels is routine, efficient and endless. Paju literally makes only glass. The driving electronics are added by LG Display's clients, which are many and various.

The production process for 4K LCD glass is not dissimilar to Full HD; the number of pixels cooked onto a substrate merely quadrupled. LG spokesman Epic Kim says this is why 4K LED LCD screens will quickly achieve economies of scale and plummet in price. '55in 4K UHD LCD panels are actually more difficult to make than the larger 84in models,' he tells me. Big is obviously better in every sense.

A SCENE OF SCIENCE

LG's Research & Development campus at Seocho, Seoul

B LCD ON SHOW

Glass substrates in production at LG Display

C ARENA OF AV

The state-of-the art Paju manufacturing facility

D GANGNAM STYLE

Shoppers in a Gangnam AV store grab a 3D demo

E HIGH-END HI-DEF

LG's 55EM960V OLED screen retails for £10,000

F A HELPING HAND

Much of the LCD production process is aided by robotic arms

G TECH TEAMWORK

LG Display engineers work in ultra-clean conditions

H AHEAD OF THE CURVE

LG has pipped rival Samsung to the post by releasing the first curved OLED TV



4K is not without its critics, though. There's an undercurrent of suspicion that panels are landing just a little too early. It's not the lack of content that's the issue, more the lack of standards, both in terms of hardware interface and broadcast distribution. Crucially, first-gen screens are predating the availability of HDMI 2.0. So is this a problem for early adopters? LG doesn't believe so. 'The main benefit of HDMI 2.0 is much greater bandwidth,' explains Thomas Lee; while current iterations of HDMI can only deliver a 4K signal at 30fps, HDMI 2.0 will deliver 60fps. This could be significant come standardisation of 4K UHD broadcasting and any announcement of a new updated Blu-ray standard – the BDA currently has a working group looking at the viability of adding both UHD and high-frame rate to the BD family. Is it possible this first generation of 4K screens could end up incompatible with these advances? LG emphatically says not. 'We would expect to be able to issue an update for our screens,' I was told.

Not so much Dallas, more...

Peel back LG's corporate gloss, and you'll find a company quite unlike its main Japanese rivals. LG is actually a family-run business, a *Chaebol*. As with Samsung, this conglomerate is based on a dynasty, albeit one that's seemingly more open to outside influence than its rival. It's had a variety of leaders who have not been part of the bloodline, and Global Communications Director Ken Hong reveals that several years ago LG attempted to adopt English as its official company language; the idea was a bold attempt to make the operation more accessible on the world stage. It would also have helped alleviate an ongoing talent shortage, says Hong. Unfortunately, the policy floundered. 'It's very difficult to find software engineers,' he bemoans.

LG's talent search goes some way to explaining acquisitions like the recent purchase of the Palm OS from Hewlett Packard. Unlike other job markets, there's next to no human exchange between Korea's two tech titans. 'It's a job-for-life situation here. If you start out at LG, you stay with LG,' says Hong. 'To be honest, we wouldn't want to hire someone who was ex-Samsung.'

Thomas Lee declined to go into detail about exactly how the Palm OS would be integrated into LG's Smart TV platform. However, he did promise

I BIG IS BEST

LG debuted its Ultra HD technology on its 84LM960V 84in screen

J LIFESTYLE CHOICE

The curved 55EA980W could sell due to its wow factor alone

that the end result will be a game-changer when it comes to online search and navigation. The HP technology behind the Palm OS will 'significantly improve internet search functionality.'

Dangerous curve ahead

Although OLED (currently) doesn't offer 4K, it does boast a trick LED panels can't yet perform: curvature. The brand's 55EA980W screen is the first TV with a concave display. According to Lee: 'there's a lot of research and development going into curved screens.' The panel certainly looks spectacular, although cynics may question if there's any benefit to the bend beyond marketing hype. 'It's more comfortable to watch and gives you a really immersive viewing experience,' I'm assured. 'Watch straight on and your eye-to-screen distance is the same from the centre to the edge.' This point is doubtless true, but only if you're in the central sweet spot. The simple fact is the design has wow factor, and that alone could compensate for the high price OLED is lumbered with at retail.

In fact, design has become something of a totem for LG, and is largely credited with skyrocketing the brand into the A-league. The launch of LG's lauded Cinema Series screens is cited by Head of Marketing for CE Craig West as the turning point for the marque. 'That's when everything really began to come together,' he recalls. 'When we took the bezel away, sales jumped.'

Of course LG's 2013 screens aren't all about cosmetics. During a deep tech workshop, LG's engineers reveal that they have made significant changes to this year's 1080p TVs, courtesy of some powerful new software beneath the bonnet. The Triple XD Engine sports a trio of new algorithms, dubbed Super Contrast Booster, Dynamic Scanning with Clear White and Dynamic Noise Reduction. The default colour engine has also been reworked, with the addition of Dynamic Clear White said to give better skin tones. LG's engineers are also intensely proud of the improvements made to this year's colour performance. 3D Gamut mapping automatically adheres to the REC.709 colour space standard, with an accuracy of 97 per cent.

So what's coming from LG in 2014? Obviously the brand isn't saying, although it did tease: 'We have some new technologies...' Feel free to speculate. I certainly won't be surprised if the brand has another curve ball up its sleeve ■

A FAMILY AFFAIR

From cosmetics company to global AV giant



LG is a relatively young company in AV terms – it opened for business in 1947 selling face cream, variants

of which LG Chemical continues to punt today. Back then the company was called Lucky – it then became Lucky Goldstar, gaining global traction with low-cost budget goods. Lucky Goldstar duly evolved into LG with the arrival of the brand's famous face logo, actually designed by a nineteen-year-old student. The company's history is held in high regard, with a bust of company founder Koo In-Hwoi standing tall in every facility, keeping a watchful eye over his extended family...

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State-of-the-art lighting can transform your run-of-the-mill AV room into a magnificent movie palace – and have performance benefits, too.

Steve May gets illuminated

LIGHT AND CINEMA have always enjoyed a symbiotic relationship. Without the former, our flickering home theatres would be little more than gloomy sheds with extravagantly comfortable seating. A well-designed lighting system can really help deliver that 'wow factor' that we want our cinema setups to provide – especially if you want the room to rock even when you're not watching a movie.

Of course the relationship between the two is complex. The dimming of house lights has become a universally recognised trigger for relaxation, in anticipation of a film yet to unspool. And clever lighting provides more than just this addictive psychological fillip; it can also have a fundamental impact on the quality of the viewing experience itself. In much the same way an untamed room can blight even the finest hi-fi equipment, poor lighting can distract from the work of Hollywood's greatest auteurs. Martin Scorsese, James Cameron, Paul W.S. Anderson – none can compete with careless illumination. And as you might imagine, there's far more to lighting control than simply flicking a switch...



GHT!



Bias lighting experiments

It's long been known that sympathetic illumination placed behind the screen can improve the subjective contrast performance of a display and reduce eyestrain. It's called bias lighting, and has been a basic tenet of professional video suites for years.

While viewers instinctively feel they should turn off all the lights in a room when watching a Blu-ray it doesn't always follow that this will automatically result in the best experience. Introducing a low level of ambient light into your viewing room will reduce eyestrain, as your pupils will not aggressively dilate so often – this doesn't apply to video projectors, for more obvious reasons. Of course, when it comes to smart lighting design you'll want to avoid reflections, too. The last thing you'll need in a comfortably dimmed room is the glare in the centre of your screen from an unfortunately placed bulb.

LED-lit LCD TVs are a particular beneficiary of bias lighting, as in full blackout conditions LED edge-lights take on the property of a torch, blasting blacks into sullen grey. Without heavy and effective black filtering, an LED TV in total black-out conditions will struggle to deliver convincing contrast. Typically, bias lighting works best with LED TVs, although you can still reap benefits with plasmas.

The trick is to throw the right quality of light behind the panel; as a basic guide, the backlight should be duller than the screen itself, and ideally around 6,500 degrees Kelvin; this reflects the colour grading standard used in broadcast suites.

Philips' Ambilight TVs take the concept of bias lighting a step further by matching screen content

Lighting is a growing part of the custom installation market



So what are your options if you want bias lighting? Well, Philips' original Ambilight system addressed bias lighting directly, but that technology quickly evolved into a general-purpose mood light. Bias lighting and multi-coloured behind-screen kits, both fluorescent and LED, are widely available online. The latter are best thought of more as a lighting design embellishment, but can equally be used to reduce eyestrain and they'll certainly add style to your cinema. For a rough idea of the effect, position an angle-poise lamp or similar behind your TV. Wall-mounted screens are a little more challenging, although LED strip lights can usually be affixed to the screen mount itself. And neither these or a behind-screen kit need be expensive – although, as always, be wary of products that seem too good to be true.

Taking control

While a basic bias lighting setup can better your AV enjoyment, the real fun begins when you ramp up your illumination ambitions and make it personal. And here, Philips (again) is making waves, with its innovative Hue LED lighting system that allows you to tweak and tailor LED bulbs via an app to suit any interior décor or mood. The system uses the ZigBee Light Link open standard, although no one else has launched quite such a high-profile proposition as Hue.

Philips' solution allows a wide variety of control, not just in terms of light levels, but also colours. The Hue app, available for iOS and Android, includes four light themes and allows you to customise the colour output using a colour picker; what could be Hammer Red one day could just as easily be Jaws Blue the next. The system is extremely expandable, officially supporting up to 50 Smart LED bulbs, but theoretically capable of handling even more.

The Hue starter pack is a tad pricey at £180, but includes three screw-mount bulbs and a ZigBee bridge, which connects to a router or a network switch via Ethernet. Additional Smart bulbs sell for £50; each is rated at 8.5W and outputs 600 Lumens, the equivalent of a 50W incandescent. Philips suggests these LED bulbs consume 80 per cent less power than incandescents, so theoretically they'll eventually pay you back.

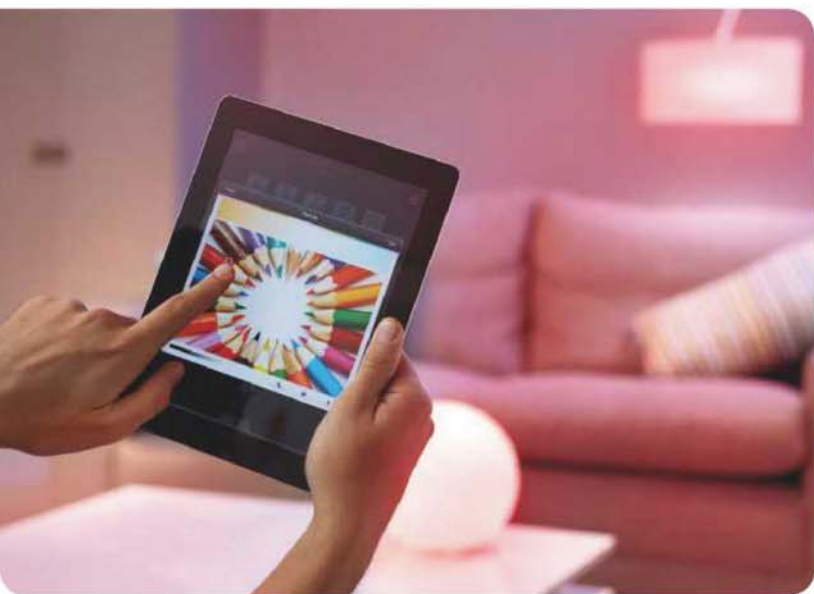
A recently released addition to the Hue stable is the LED LightStrip. These are 2m long, flexible, and can be cut to size – making them ideal for those who want to get creative. They output 120 Lumens and draw 12W. Pricing is £80 each.

One creative alternative to regular dichroic and LED lamps – and even more customisable – are fibre optics. Usually seen providing the starfield pattern in the ceilings of unapologetically upmarket home cinemas, they are superb at creating West End theatre ambience. Indeed, the creative options for fibre optics are limited only by budget and ambition. They can be used for highlighting effects in everything from living spaces to hallways, and as there are no bulbs to replace, they work well in a permanent structure, like a ceiling. Suppliers like Starscape (starscape.co.uk) offer off-the-shelf kits which consist of an LED light source, 120 points of light, 'twinkle' wheel and associated hardware, from £183

(for the Orion package). You'll need a bit of DIY nous to fit one, or the phone number of someone who does, but the finished result is sure to impress. Larger packages, for galaxy-sized theatres, are also available.

If you're not fazed by DIY, then plenty can be achieved with the wide range of fibre optics and LED solutions on the market. However, a simpler (although more expensive option) is to engage the services of a custom installer, who will be happy to makeover your room to *Tron*-esque levels of illumination lunacy. Lighting design itself has evolved into a key aspect of every professional install, with most pro-control and home automation players holding a torch for it. Ian Child, Principal Engineer at the Yorkshire-based custom install company Wall of Sound, says that 'lighting has become a great way of expanding the scope' of the average custom install. His company started out as a specialist in multi-room audio and home cinema, but now offers networking, lighting and environmental control systems as standard. 'With rapid developments in LED bulbs there are lots of new opportunities to enhance the look and feel of a cinema room.' ➤

Philips' Hue Wi-Fi LED bulbs allow you to create lighting scenes and control them on a tablet, phone or computer



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Guy Singleton, design director at award-winning install outfit Imagine This, concurs. 'When designing a luxury theatre or media room the lighting is, in our opinion, just as important as the selection of the Blu-ray player,' he tells *HCC*. 'In fact it can transform the room, with the use of circuits and scenes allowing the correct lighting levels to be recalled time and again. If you think about it, you spend time calibrating your screen to THX/ISF standards with both colour and brightness. It would be nice if you could recreate the exact light levels every time or your calibration becomes worthless. You can do this with a lighting controller and we absolutely insist on this in all of our installations and designs.'

Singleton also implores you not to forget about natural lighting. 'It's still part of lighting control. Window and blind treatments that integrate with the system will help deliver the very best performance. In the very best high-end theatres it would be unusual to have windows but if you do, controlling the light from them is imperative.'

'Although lighting is often overlooked and added on as an afterthought, it is simply one of the most important aspects of any cinema.'

LED on the charge

Still the most commonly used lamp in any dimming system is a 50mm dichroic halogen. It's inexpensive, dims smoothly to a warm glow and effortlessly dispenses eye-pleasing, popcorn-munching ambience. LED has started to gain traction with pro installers, but while this greenest of options may be gentler on power consumption, replicating the pleasing look of halogens is not easy.

Control brand Crestron has released its first range of dimmable LED light fittings under the Luminaries banner. Dubbed CLEDs, they offer a smooth, warm dimming curve, colour temperature and Lumen output very similar to halogen. Not only do they have a projected lifespan of 70,000 hours, they're easily integrated into a wider Crestron home automation system.

Integrating lighting into a larger home cinema installation, or throughout a property, means that you'll get all the embellishments, like dedicated wall switches and multiple control options. Home automation company Control4 offers dimmers and



Fibre optics are a great solution for those who wish to get creative – and many of us are seduced by the idea of a star ceiling

high-end switches that meld lights with energy consumption and security. The brand's Wireless Adaptive Phase Dimmer is compatible with LEDs, incandescents, halogens, electronic low-voltage (solid state) transformers and fluorescents. A customisable keypad and dimmer can be configured with up to seven custom-engraved, LED backlit buttons (because you know you want a button that screams Man Cave). More customisation is possible too, including an ambient light sensor to automatically adjust the brightness of status LEDs and button backlighting.

Although they might not seem natural bedfellows, the ability to deploy sophisticated lighting is part and parcel of the networked revolution now engulfing all aspects of home automation and system control. As the infrastructure to support AV and control becomes standardized and more pervasive, the appeal of controllable lighting becomes irresistible. For installers it's more often than not part of the basic system design, intrinsic to the AV that follows.

At this level, exemplified by the work of CEDIA installers at the higher end of the market, there's really no limit to the cost and scale of a deployment. Guy Singleton reveals that projects undertaken by Imagine This vary in price from £1,000 to £100,000. The end goal, though, is the same: to take the entertainment experience to another level altogether ■

High-end systems combine intelligent lighting with smart control





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RAKO: THE RETRO-FIT LIGHTING OPTION



Rako's RF lighting solution can be controlled via dedicated keypads and iOS and Android devices



The biggest challenge facing most home cinema fans is how to effectively retro-fit an existing cinema room without re-wiring the entire joint. The solution is an RF wireless lighting system.

Rako's such offering is both ingenious and straightforward. If your theatre room already has the lighting fitments required, then implementing a wireless solution is surprisingly straightforward; your lighting installer should be in and out with a minimum of fuss. If you're converting from a single legacy fitment to scattered downlights, you'll probably need to factor in some chasing and clean-up work.

So what do you actually need to retro-fit a Smart lighting system? The average cinema room would utilise Rako's RTD500-L in-line dimmer, which can handle low-voltage halogen and tungsten loads up to a total of 500W. Rako offers other dimmers for different

loads – the RDL250-L handles up to 250W, while the RDL1200-C copes with 1,200W; the latter would be overkill in a domestic cinema, though. The RDL500-L supports a maximum of ten 50W bulbs, which represents a circuit. Your cinema room could have two or three circuits, each individually controllable.

Push the button

Controlling these dimmers would be an RCM-070 keypad. This seven-button controller features four programmable scenes, plus manual dimming. Helpfully, the keypad fits into a standard single gang UK back-box. As the system works wirelessly via RF, no connection to the mains supply is required. Instead, the keypad is powered by a simple coin battery. Matching keypads can be used to control projection screens, too.

To enable Wi-Fi control of the Rako system, you'll need a wireless bridge. This is located

next to a router or network switch and provides a Wi-Fi access point for the system, which can then be controlled via an iPad/iOS or Android device. The Rako app replicates the on-wall keypad and allows you to temporarily override any given scene. It's a doddle to use.

Of course, you can extend your Rako system out of the cinema and across the rest of your multiplex. Additional features include a Security Time Clock module, so that when you're out and about, the house still appears occupied, and a presence/daylight sensor.

Naturally, the system can only be installed by a certified electrician. A single-room install may cost around £2,000 or considerably less, depending on the particulars of the job. However, the end result is an intelligent lighting system that's the equivalent of any celebrity crib ■



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Revisited THE TOP 10 3D Blu-rays

Yet again, we don our silly spex to find the best

discs for your collection



LAST YEAR WE put our goggle-eyed brains together and came up with our definitive list of the ten best 3D Blu-ray titles. Since then, however, a lot has changed, with more and more stereoscopic releases coming to market, and directors such as Ridley Scott, Peter Jackson and Sam Raimi joining the 3D party.

So this issue we've taken on the challenge once more, highlighting the discs we believe offer the very best 3D imaging around – and flagging up forthcoming releases you should definitely have your eye(s) on. Read on...



10. **Sammy's Great Escape 3D**

A belated cash-in on Pixar's *Finding Nemo*, the 2010 Belgian animated feature *A Turtle's Tale: Sammy's Adventures* did well enough to justify the bankrolling of this sequel. And while all the original ideas here could be written on the back of an ant, this Blu-ray release's MVC 1.78:1 1080p 3D presentation is nothing short of sensational.

As director Ben Stassen stresses in the disc's bonus interviews, joint production companies nWave Pictures and Illuminata Pictures have been working on 3D animations for yonks – the result is a confident and eye-opening use of the stereoscopic format, with utterly convincing negative parallax effects and expertly-staged action scenes. You may not care what happens to the eponymous turtle, but your home cinema system will love him.

Buy it: *Sammy's Great Escape 3D*, Warner Home Video, All-region BD, £25 Approx

09. **Flying Swords of Dragon Gate 3D**

Wuxia movies have always impressed with their visual panache, but *Flying Swords...* ups the enjoyment ante courtesy of its imaginative 3D presentation. A remake of 1966 film *Dragon Gate Inn*, and filmed in the next-gen format by genre icon Tsui Hark (*Once Upon a Time in China*), it puts Jet Li in the lead role as nomadic corruption fighter Zhou Huai'an.

In the build up to production, Li expressed hopes that 3D would inject a new lease of life into the Wuxia film industry, and he wasn't wrong – the wire-work stunts and elaborate swordplay in this \$35m production are a real treat in 3D, with Hark utilising the additional depth to build layers to his fight sequences and get your adrenalin pumping. Revolver Entertainment's MVC 2.40:1 encode is razor-sharp, too.



Buy it: *Flying Swords of Dragon Gate 3D*, Revolver Entertainment, Region B BD, £20 Approx

08. **Titanic 3D**

The road to 3D nirvana is littered with unloved Blu-ray copies of 2D-3D conversions – the likes of *Clash of the Titans* and *Alice in Wonderland* spring to mind. Good for us, then, that James Cameron spotted the problem with conversions (the studios weren't spending enough time and money on them,



AND DON'T FORGET...

The titles that made it into our previous Top Ten

Drive Angry 3D

Nicholas Cage is in his car and not very happy about it

Hugo

Stereoscopic fantasy from Hollywood legend Martin Scorsese

The Adventures of Tintin

The young Belgian goes on a motion-capped European jaunt

Final Destination 5

Death's merry antics look all the better in 3D

The Hole

Joe Dante's macabre thriller wants to suck you in...

TT3D

Are you ready to whizz around the Isle of Man on two wheels?

Tron: Legacy

Sci-fi reboot stuns with its virtual worlds

Transformers: Dark of the Moon

Giant robots smash each other to bits! In 3D!

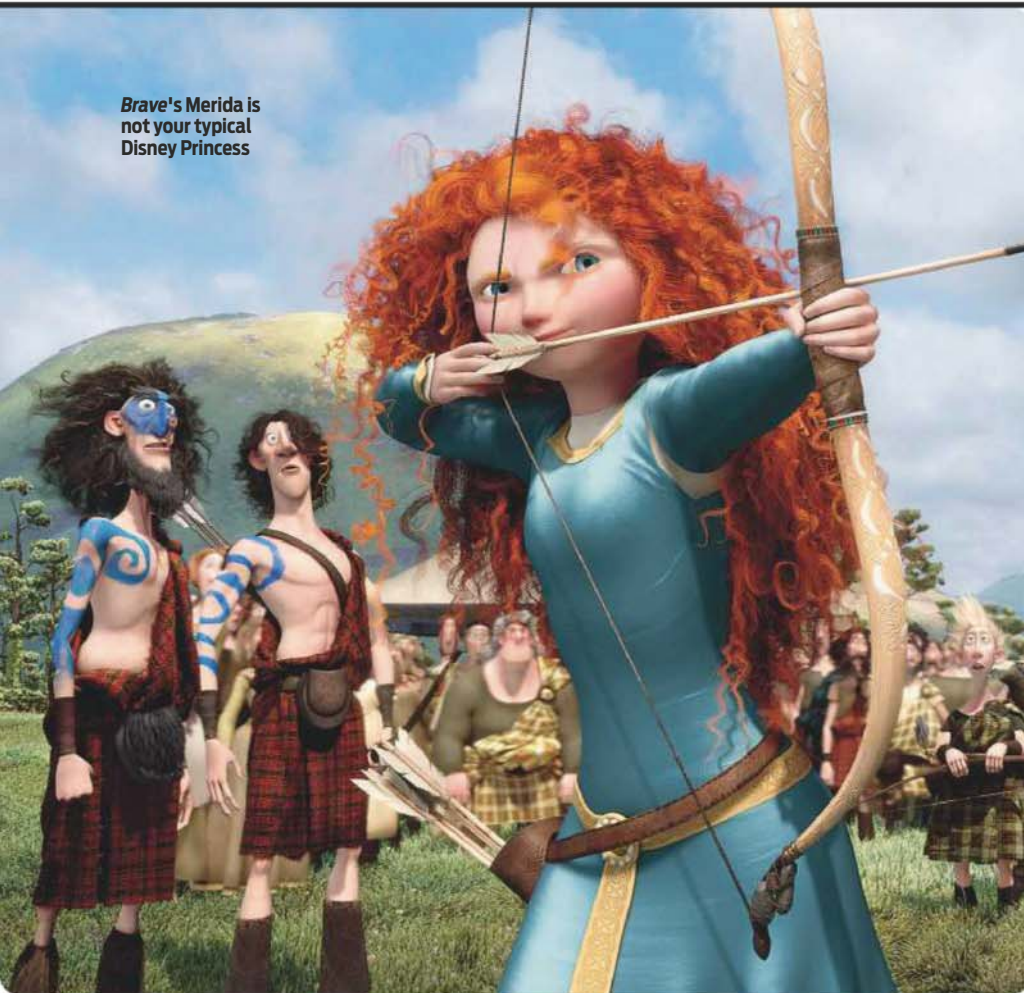
Tangled

Fantastic-looking fairy tale animation

Resident Evil: Afterlife

Slow-mo water-soaked fisticuffs are the order of the day here

Brave's Merida is not your typical Disney Princess



basically) and then decamped for a year with \$18m before surfacing with this 3D re-release of his 1997 Oscar-winning blockbuster.

Titanic 3D is proof that 3D conversions from 2D sources can work. There's no doubt that the film's original high production values help, but the attention to detail of Cameron's team, which went through the movie shot by shot rather than using an automatic process, is the real key here. Scenes, from the people-packed dock to the ship's ornate interiors, offer such natural, immersive and subtle depth that it's hard to imagine the period world created being any more tangible.

Buy it: *Titanic: Collector's Edition 3D*, 20th Century Fox, All-region BD, £29 Approx

07. *Brave* 3D

This refreshing take on the 'Disney Princess' genre easily ranks as our favourite 3D 'toon, thanks to a 2.40:1 Full HD encode that drips with fine detail and pin-point delineation, showcasing the carefully-crafted stereoscopic visuals of Pixar's animation team. Nearly every shot makes great use of depth, with sequences playing much better in 3D than they do when seen 'flat' on the accompanying platter. Volumetric concerns, such as the roundness of faces, the textures of the rough-hewn clothing and – most impressive of all – Merida's untamed hair, aren't a problem either.

This is a bright, immersive and crystal-clear 3D presentation – and the Blu-ray's Dolby TrueHD 7.1 mix is also reference-grade.

Buy it: *Brave* 3D, Walt Disney Home Entertainment, All-region BD, £28 Approx

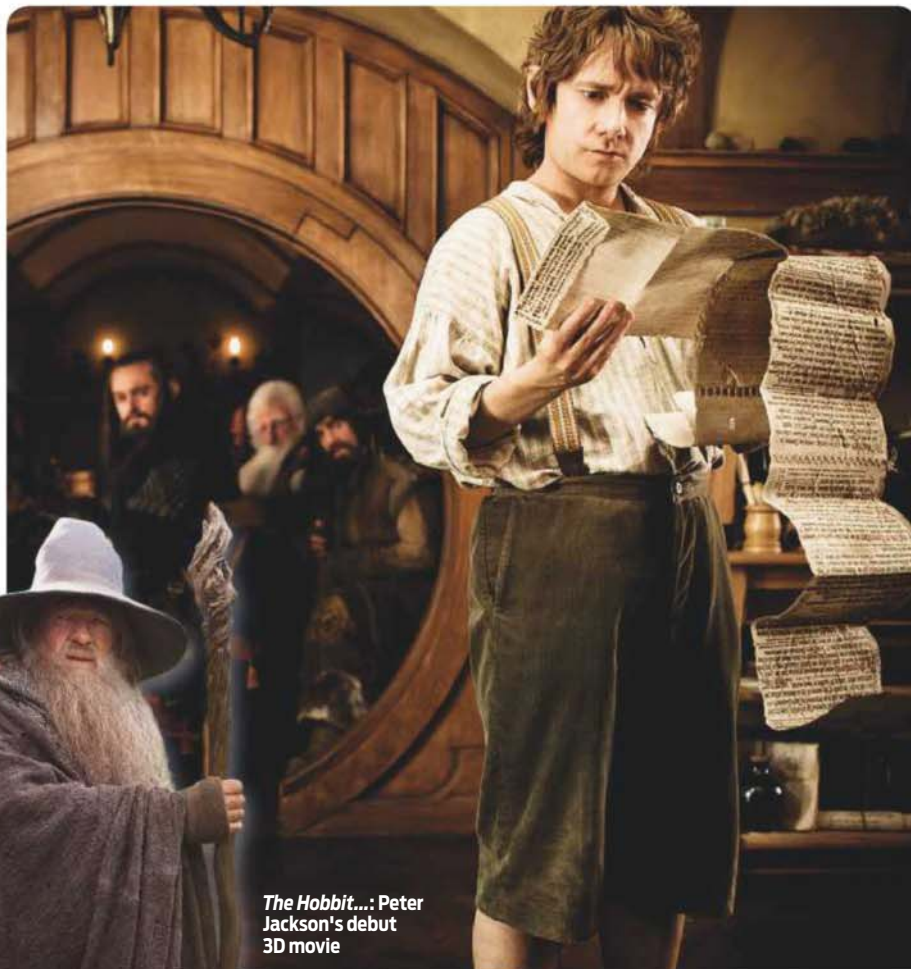
06. *The Hobbit: An Unexpected Journey* 3D

Peter Jackson had served as producer on the 3D fantasy *The Adventures of Tintin* in 2011, but finally got behind the stereoscopic camera for this return to Middle-earth in 2012.

The move to 3D posed immediate problems for Jackson and his VFX crew – the previous perspective-bending tricks of the ...*Lord of the Rings* trilogy, which memorably made Ian McKellen's Gandalf tower above his Hobbit friends, were far more difficult to nail in stereo. Yet the solution (more CGI!) works faultlessly, and the beautifully dressed sets, such as Bilbo's Hobbit Hole, pack palpable depth while the sweeping location shots appear vast in scale. Meanwhile, Jackson isn't afraid to have occasional fun with elements pushing into the foreground.

Praise must also be given to distributor Warner Home Video for splitting *The Hobbit's* 3D encode across two Blu-ray discs. While getting up halfway through a movie is a pain, it ensures a top-quality MVC encode.

Buy it: *The Hobbit: An Unexpected Journey*, Warner Home Video, All-region BD, £28 Approx



The Hobbit...: Peter Jackson's debut 3D movie

Avatar: the 3D format's poster boy



05. Avatar 3D

The movie that kickstarted the resurgence of 3D cinema in 2009 eventually received a general Blu-ray release in its groundbreaking format at the end of last year, and it was worth the wait – this is an indispensable addition to any stereoscopic setup.

The film's painstaking production process ensures *Avatar* is a 3D marvel from start to finish, welcoming eager viewers to the world of Pandora with an image packed with detail and depth. Both the live-action and CGI sequences constantly impress, and the picture at all times feels natural rather than falsely layered. Cameron has heaps of fun with his new toy, too, zipping the camera around the 3D landscapes to create a dizzying experience.

Astonishing stuff – roll on *Avatar 2*, 3 and 4.

Buy it: *Avatar 3D*, 20th Century Fox, All-region BD/R2 DVD, £28 Approx

04. Dredd 3D

It was nearly impossible to find a 2D showing of *Dredd* at UK cinemas – with good reason, too, as this is a movie that was clearly meant to be seen in 3D. Armed with the latest generations of the RED and Phantom 3D camera systems, plus kit made specifically for the movie, cinematographer Anthony Dod Mantle paints the screen with memorable 3D images unlike anything you've ever seen – this violent comic conversion is packed full of close-up details and eye-searing colours. Naturally, the surreal, stylised drug sequences impress the most, but throughout the movie the 3D effect is used to give the central Peach Trees tower block an epic sense of scale.

Another reason to stick to the 3D version is that the disc's 2D encode is curiously blighted by excessive noise in numerous shots. It's almost as if the studio is trying to tell you something...

Buy it: *Dredd 3D*, Entertainment in Video, Region B BD, £25 Approx

03. Prometheus 3D

Ridley Scott may have confused a few people with his far-from-straightforward *Alien* prequel, but no one will quibble with his mastery of 3D filmmaking. Famed for being one of the most artistically-minded directors in Hollywood, Scott meticulously frames his shots to place you in the middle of the movie – and the breathtaking sequence where David interacts with the Engineers' holographic star map has become the stuff of AV demo legend.

Buy it: *Prometheus: 3-Disc Collector's Edition*, 20th Century Fox, All-region BD, £28 Approx

Dredd 3D: one of the most stylised stereoscopic flicks around

Ridley Scott's *Prometheus* instantly became a favourite 3D demo disc



THE TEXAS CHAINSAW MASSACRE

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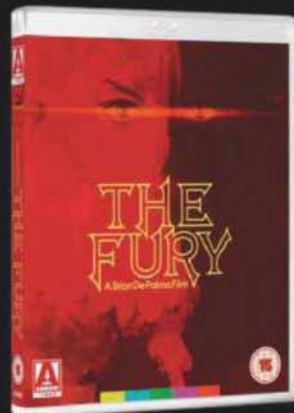


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ON THE HORIZON

Forthcoming 3D Blu-rays we have on pre-order

The Great Gatsby

Baz Luhrmann gives F Scott Fitzgerald's novel a glammed-up 3D makeover

Pacific Rim

Mechas vs Kaijus! If you like your 3D movies large and loud, then this is the disc for you...

World War Z

We're hoping the global zombie apocalypse will look monstrous in Brad Pitt's smash hit

Cloudy with a Chance of Meatballs 2



One of the original 3D demo discs gets a sequel. Expect pin-sharp animation and plenty of colour

Man of Steel

Zach Snyder retools the Superman fable with the help of a mega budget and a 2D-3D conversion

The Hobbit: The Desolation of Smaug

We've spent all year wondering what Peter Jackson's dragon will look like in 3D

The Wolverine

The adamantium-clawed mutant trots off to Japan to battle the Yakuza in this sixth X-Men flick



Boy + boat
+ CG tiger
= 3D heaven

02. Life of Pi 3D

Ang Lee's fantasy adaptation bagged Academy Awards for Best Cinematography and Best Visual Effects, and we're not about to argue with that. Filmed on digital 3D cameras and featuring an entirely CG-animated but eminently believable tiger (devised by production house Rhythm and Hues Studios, which had done a similar thing with Aslan in the *Narnia* franchise), it's a remarkable achievement and achingly beautiful to behold.

Luckily, this visual endeavour is brilliantly realised on 3D Blu-ray via a flawless 1.85:1 MVC encode. Black levels are ocean-deep, the colour palette dazzles with vibrant primary colours and detailing is superb. As for the 3D itself, Lee proves to be an assured user of the extra dimension. There's nothing jarringly artificial here; instead you get depth-charged shots that draw you in to the story, sea stretching far away into the distance, and cracking sequences that'll have you reaching for the rewind button, particularly the flying-fish-vs-tiger face-off.

Buy it: *Life of Pi 3D*, 20th Century Fox, Region A/B BD, £28 Approx

01. Oz the Great and Powerful 3D

If there's a better 3D Blu-ray available than Sam Raimi's prequel to *The Wizard of Oz* please let us know – for us, this is the current king of stereoscopic home cinema.

The native 3D photography here is so involving that it easily makes the film more enjoyable than the 2D version – in fact, the land of Oz has been so obviously crafted to view with goggles on that it might be worth buying a 3D display just to sample it. This is a fantasy world full of towering rockscapes, buzzing beasts and enchanted forest glades, here delivered with impeccable depth and dimensionality. And the 3D can be potentially aggressive to, so while one minute you're gazing contentedly at the yellow brick road snaking toward the horizon, the next you're ducking involuntarily as a legion of flying monkeys swoops down at your face. Oozing colour, sharpness and imagination, this is pure magic.

Buy it: *Oz the Great and Powerful 3D*, Walt Disney Home Entertainment, All-region BD, £25 Approx ■



The magical world of Oz, home of Rachel Weisz's wicked witch, is a knockout in 3D



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Bonus Blu-ray den

Mark Craven reports on an affordable cinema room that was almost an afterthought



The room build begins to take shape, with custom cabinets in place for the front left/right and centre channel speakers



An on-wall TV mount was fitted at an early stage, slightly recessed to enable the owner's screen to appear super-thin



At the other end of the room, a bulkhead was constructed for the Panasonic PJ, with a trapdoor enabling servicing when required



This room functions as both a family snug and a home cinema

THE OWNER OF this smart-looking media room didn't originally set out to own it. He'd actually called upon custom install outfit The Big Picture to establish home automation electronics throughout his house, with the idea of constructing an additional space for a dedicated cinema. But when this proved untenable, The Big Picture suggested turning the family snug into a movie palace. 'Being open to ideas, I challenged them to impress me,' he tells us.

This wasn't to be a *carte blanche* to deck the room with cost-no-object hardware, however. The space was refitted and the kit specified to a clear – and eminently affordable – budget. In fact, the cost of the whole makeover, including hardware, came in at under £15,000.

Other criteria included the inclusion of the family's consoles, that the setup was simplistic to use and, most importantly, that it was a discreet solution – albeit one tied into the dramatic black-and-white colour scheme that had already been chosen.

Stealth makeover

To meet those discreet needs, Midlands-based The Big Picture specified a drop-down projector screen, in-wall speakers and bespoke cabinets, thus keeping the cinema-specific gadgetry out of sight.

The screen is an 80in model from Screen Excellence, employing acoustically transparent fabric to allow the centre channel speaker to beaver away behind. The speakers are from the US brand Leon, driven by a five-channel Rotel amplifier – once the owner had been impressed by a demo – with Profile 505s used for the L/C/R soundstage, and housed in custom blocks. These are then hidden via specially designed cloth grilles made to match the striped décor. As you can

see from the picture below, the finish is nearly invisible.

Firing at the screen is an ISF-calibrated Panasonic projector, mounted to a bulkhead at the rear of the room, flanked by the Leon Vault 114 in-ceiling speakers.

All the electronics are buried away in a cabinet at the front of the room, which uses Middle Atlantic racks and snug face plates for a smart finish. An Oppo Blu-ray player handles movies, with an Xbox 360, PlayStation 3 and Nintendo Wii adding bigscreen gaming fun. The owner's Linn DS is also housed here for music playback.

Despite the modest budget, the room still features acoustic treatments, Smart lighting and integrated control. The former includes heavy blinds on the left wall and a framed rock-wool absorber opposite to tackle reflections. A Control4 system, meanwhile, oversees the lighting array, automated screen and AV electronics, either by a regular handset or iPad. A mounted LCD touchpanel just inside the door is also programmed with common lighting scenes, and a three-second push will turn everything off including the electronics as the owner leaves the room. Another button turns on the hall light so he doesn't end up flailing around in the dark.

The owner is understandably impressed with the end result. 'To suggest they succeeded would be a huge understatement. The situation is perfect – snug by day, entertainment hub come the weekends.

'The picture is stunning but what really blows us away is the sound, while the fully integrated game stations in custom rack-mounts just finish the effect amazingly, and our four- and six-year-olds have no trouble using any part of the equipment.

'Everybody loves it. The only problem I have is that I can never get in there myself...' ■ ➤

KIT CHECKLIST

PANASONIC: PT-AE4000 projector
ROTEL: RSX1550 five-channel AV receiver
SCREEN EXCELLENCE: 80in automated acoustically-transparent projector screen
LEON: 3 x Profile 505 in-wall speakers; 2 x Vault 114 in-ceiling speakers
VELODYNE: 2 x CHT-12Q subwoofers
OPPO: BDP-93EU Blu-ray player
CONTROL4: HC200 system controller; SR250 remote control
LINN: DS network audio player
SONY: PlayStation 3
MICROSOFT: Xbox 360
NINTENDO: Wii



The projector screen recedes to reveal a wall-mounted LED TV



INSTALL INFO

A ANOTHER BRICK IN THE WALL

Heat from the AV equipment dissipates into this brick and tiled void on the outside of the property

B YOU'RE SURROUNDED

The owner had heard a demo of the Leon speakers and Rotel amplification, and requested the same for his room makeover

C TAKING IT EASY

Operating the system is done via an iPad with Control4 interface – pre-programmed one-button presses take care of all the room's main functions

D LOADS OF LFE

The speaker system uses two Velodyne CHT-12Q subwoofers, housed in the custom-built front stage cabinet. These pack 12in drivers and 225W amplifiers, and plumb the depths down to 25Hz

E RACK 'EM UP

Source equipment – including an Xbox 360 and PlayStation 3 console – is hidden out of sight in the low-slung rack. Custom rack mounts ensure a neat look, and the top of the cabinet is layered with a cloth-covered foam to soak up speaker reflections



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REVIEWS

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 Affordable 40in LED TV **ROUNDUP** Four entry-level AV receivers go head-to-head **AND MORE!**

White lightning

Quadral's new Signo Avantgarde array looks the business – does its sound performance also dazzle? See p56



HCC RATINGS KEY...

Outstanding	★★★★★
Above average	★★★★☆
Acceptable	★★★☆☆
Disappointing	★★☆☆☆
Dire	★☆☆☆☆

4K goes mainstream

Samsung's UE55F9000 makes UHD tech more manageably sized and affordable than ever before. **John Archer** reports

SAMSUNG MAY HAVE been beaten to the 4K/UHD drop by Sony, but it's not about to let its Japanese rival Hoover up all the early-adopter UHD action. Just weeks after Sony's 65X9005A lit up our test benches, Samsung's debut 'mass market' UHD set, the UE55F9000, is here. And while it is in many ways quite different to Sony's groundbreaker, it still makes a potent case for the benefits of embracing UHD for your next TV.

UHD/4K TVs, should you not know what I'm talking about, are a new breed of sets that provide four times as many pixels as normal Full HD TVs – 3,840 across by 2,160 down. And as Sony's 65X9005A proved, the impact all those extra pixels can have on picture quality is extraordinary.

Some argue, though, that this impact requires very large screens to make itself felt. It's going to be up to the relatively diminutive 55in UE55F9000 to debunk this common conception.

Samsung's set will also need to prove itself a tantalising alternative to Sony's rival screen – a job it sets about immediately with a markedly lower £3,300 price tag and a much slimmer, less controversial design than Sony's startlingly large, jet-black head-turner.

The smaller bezel denies the UE55F9000 room to stick a speaker array of anything like the size of the magnetic fluid system fitted into Sony's set. But the Samsung's svelteness certainly makes it easier to accommodate in a standard living room.

Connectivity on the UE55F9000 features four HDMI's, built-in Wi-Fi and USB sockets as the chief highlights. The majority of its inputs aren't built into the main

TV body, however. Instead, most are on a slinky little external connections box that connects to the TV via a single cable. This is, of course, a neat approach for people thinking of wall-hanging the TV, but it also potentially permits Samsung to upgrade the set's connectivity with future external switch boxes and chipsets – similar to the way you can upgrade the brand's F7000 and F8000 TVs with 'Evolution Kits'.

The UHD native resolution is far from the only eye-catching feature on the UE55F9000. Particularly interesting is its 3D engine, since this is the first Active 3D UHD TV we've seen and will thus deliver a Full UHD-resolution 3D picture to each eye. The UE55F9000 also sports Samsung's powerful Smart TV system, with its attractive if occasionally slightly confusing multi-hub interface, plus masses of apps and video streaming services.

Deeply impressive

Playing back Samsung and Sony UHD-content showreels, it's immediately obvious that UHD technology still has a significant impact at 55in – even without sitting closer to the screen than you normally would.

Views across New York on the

Samsung showreel enjoy a sense of depth you just don't get on normal HD TVs, as the extra resolution avoids the flattening loss of detail and focus apparent with long-distance shots. Those extra pixels improve colour blends, too, making objects appear more solid. And with jagged edges a thing of the past, the resulting image looks so much closer to the way you experience 'retina resolution' in the real world. ▶



The secondary touchpad remote enables voice control, too



AV INFO

PRODUCT:
55in UHD-resolution LED TV

POSITION:
The top of Samsung's 2013 range, bar the £35,000 85in UHD flagship

PEERS:
Sony KDL-55X9005A

Samsung's F9000 series sports a sleek, classy design





With native 4K content still hard to find, owners of the UE55F9000 will initially be largely restricted to watching HD material upscaled to the screen's higher pixel count. Adding so many extra 'made up' pixels is obviously a major processing challenge, but this TV rises to it well, adding obvious extra detail and sharpness without generating any serious unwanted side effects. Even during sequences with lots of motion, such as ...*Return of the King*'s final climactic battle, the picture still looks super-detailed and free of motion blur.

Compared to the upscaled images of its Sony rival, Samsung's look crisper. However,

'3D BDs are upscaled to Ultra HD resolution and the effect is spectacular, oozing depth and detail'

Sony's Triluminos technology does provide more nuanced colours.

The UE55F9000's picture quality isn't solely down to resolution. It also enjoys a natural colour palette, while its black level performance – delivered by a local dimming edge LED lighting array – is excellent, offering similar black level depth and slightly more black uniformity than Sony's X9005A.

You should avoid the Dynamic and Natural picture presets where possible, as both these modes push sharpness too hard; edges become stressed and noise levels extreme.

Last on my test list is 3D, and in some ways it's the most impressive part of the

Samsung's upscaling engine proves highly effective, ramping up detail and sharpness

UE55F9000's whole performance. Samsung's persistence with active, full-resolution technology for 3D means my *Hobbit...* and *Tangled* 3D Blu-rays are upscaled to UHD 3D – and the effect is spectacular. The images ooze pixel depth and detail. Largescale sequences like the dwarves' escape from the underground goblin kingdom in *The Hobbit...* prove astonishingly immersive.

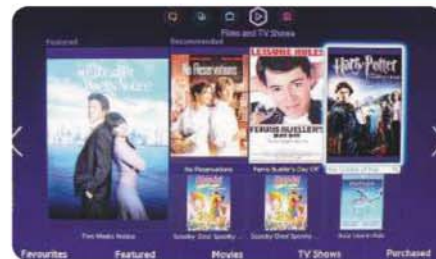
It's not perfect, though. There's a small amount of crosstalk noise, and the huge strain put on Samsung's processing by upscaling 3D can lead to increased motion judder. Nor can you watch 3D in bright light either, because of the flickering of the active shutter glasses. These three issues might tip some people toward the Sony 65X9005A's less high-resolution but more relaxing Passive 3D approach. For me, though, the impact of UHD 3D is irresistible.

The Samsung's built-in speakers serve up only a fair-to-middling performance, scoring okay on treble detail and mid-range openness, but lacking attack and power during explosive moments; there's no comparison to the thunderous efforts of Sony's 65X9005A. This shouldn't be a deal breaker, though – a high-end display like this deserves to be married to a dedicated speaker setup.

Edging ahead

Samsung's UE55F9000 delivers a spectacular UHD picture performance that shouts 'next-generation' with every last miniscule pixel of its being. I rate it slightly more impressive than Sony's equivalent – and it's a few hundred quid cheaper, too... ■

ON THE MENU



→ Samsung's menus are full of colour and visual tricks, but it takes time to get to grips with the multi-hub interface, particularly the way it suggests available video content from a variety of sources

SPECIFICATIONS

3D: Yes. Active
ULTRA HD: Yes. 3,840 x 2,160 resolution
TUNER: Yes. Freeview HD, Freesat HD
CONNECTIONS: 4 x HDMI; 3 x USB; Ethernet; composite video input; component video input; optical digital audio output; CI slot; Scart
SOUND: 70W
BRIGHTNESS: N/A
CONTRAST RATIO: N/A
DIMENSIONS (OFF STAND): 1,246(w) x 718(h) x 39(d)mm
WEIGHT (OFF STAND): 25kg
FEATURES: Built-in Wi-Fi; UHD upscaling; 1,000Hz motion engine; two pairs of 3D glasses included; Smart TV system with recommendation engine; DLNA network playback support; USB multimedia playback support; external connections box; colour management; gesture control; voice control; iOS and Android smart device control

HCC VERDICT



Samsung UE55F9000

→ £3,300 Approx → www.samsung.co.uk
 → Tel: 0330 7267864

HIGHS: Spectacular UHD picture quality; upscaled 2D and 3D looks awesome; slim-line design and aggressive price
LOWS: Dynamic and Natural presets look noisy; some aspects of the Smart TV interface are confusing; minor judder with 3D

Performance ★★★★★

Design ★★★★★

Features ★★★★★

Overall ★★★★★

“
Classy looks; balanced sound;
excellent integration; controlled
bass; clear dialogue.”

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Precision engineering

Tannoy has rolled its traditional technology into a tasty new range of speakers. **Ed Selley** is very impressed with the results

OF ALL OF the big British speaker brands still in existence, Tannoy is perhaps the most unusual. In effect there are two Tannoys; the first produces capable and attractive budget and lifestyle speakers that are relatively conventional in design and appearance; the other produces speakers that are built around the premise of large, highly sensitive speakers that make use of the company's long-standing dual concentric system, where the tweeter is placed inside the axis of the main driver. Many of these speakers – the Prestige range in general – might look like they've dropped through a hole in time from 1959 but they are capable of great things.

Where things get interesting is where these two ranges meet. The Definition lineup has already featured in *Home Cinema Choice* and those large, elegant speakers left a very positive impression. Now Tannoy has taken some of the elements of the Definition range and created the smaller Precision series. Like the Definitions, the Precisions are a halfway house between the visually elegant side of Tannoy and the classic, high-sensitive designs of old.

Going round in circles

At the core of all the Precision models is an all-new version of the brand's Dual Concentric driver. This is a 6in version combining a 1in titanium tweeter in the throat of a wood fibre midbass driver. The latter has a metallic paint finish that, at a glance, might make the driver appear metal but it holds true to the traditional construction methods Tannoy employ. In the case of the smallest member of the range, the 6.1 standmount, it is the only driver in the speaker, but other members of the Precision family also make use of a conventional version of the same midbass unit, less the tweeter.



AV INFO

PRODUCT:
5.1 floorstanding system

POSITION:
Between the Revolution and Definition series

PEERS:
KEF R series;
Monitor Audio GX series;
Acoustic Energy Reference series

These drivers are mounted in a cabinet that stylistically gives more than a nod to the larger Definition range. This combines very solid flat front and rear panels with elegantly curved sides – a combination designed to naturally reduce standing waves inside the cabinet. Tannoy has also added additional bracing internally.

Other tricks, like the Differential Materials Technology system used to couple the driver chassis to the cabinet, are applied with a view to further reduce resonance. In the case of the 6.2 floorstander (and the larger 6.4 model not reviewed here) great attention has been lavished on the plinth, which arrives coupled to the cabinet. It's a very substantial affair that allows for adjustment of the attached spikes from both the top and the bottom of the cabinet. In practice, the adjustment is easy enough from the underside, but those of you who live your life by a spirit level might be pleased by the above-the-line access.

Home cinema cavalry

Naturally for Tannoy, the 6.1 standmount and 6.2 floorstander are sold as stereo components – the home cinema-centric parts of our 5.1 package come courtesy of the Precision 6C centre speaker and the TS2.12 subwoofer.

The latter is not a member of the Precision range as such, having been around for over a year, but is offered by the brand in this

'The 6C centre is a serious heavyweight – you will need to give it a significant amount of room'

multichannel package (and another set that uses the smaller 6.1s for both front and surround duties).

The 6C is a serious heavyweight even judged by the standards of other centre speakers at the price. It shares the same cabinet cross sectional area as the floorstanders, and because Tannoy has decided not to make it reliant on a single Dual Concentric driver and has instead given it an additional pair of bass cones (one passive), you will need to allow it a significant amount of room. A supplied cradle at least aids installation on an AV stand.

The styling of the TS2.12 subwoofer is in keeping with the rest of the speakers – in as much as a big cube is ever going to blend in with curved-edge cabinets. This woofer uses the increasingly popular configuration of an active driver (here a 12in) partnered with a passive one, to give a greater radiating area. The former driver is motivated by a 500W

amplifier and the overall dimensions of the cabinet means that, even though it is actually the cheapest part of this surround package, it ought to be able to underpin the other speakers to good effect. We have auditioned it previously as a standalone product and found it to be superb for the £550 asking price.

The technology of the Precision range is undoubtedly impressive but there's equally good news when it comes to aesthetics and finish. The styling of the Precisions owes

'The sound is almost liquid-smooth from top to bottom – controlled, detailed and cohesive'

more than a little to the larger Definition range but the smaller drivers gives them more elegant proportions than their bigger brothers, and in the case of the floorstanders in particular, these have to be some of the best-looking speakers at or anywhere near the price point. The build is equally substantial and the finish is excellent as well – these are the kind of speakers that you look at and fall in love with immediately. Neat design touches abound, like the quintet of binding posts allowing for a separate earth connection.

The only slight oddity is that the ghost of Henry Ford is apparently in charge of the Tannoy colour swatch as, although the stereo pairs are available in high gloss and satin wood finishes, the centre is only available in gloss black – so that is your only option for multichannel, unless you're happy to mix 'n' match.

Ready to rumble

Placement of the Precisions proved easy enough. Although they are rear-ported, the energy from the bass ports appears fairly limited across all models and they all seem quite unfussy even when placed close to a wall. And with the speakers *in situ*, the news is almost exclusively good.

The Precisions have some aspects to their behaviour that is classically Tannoy. They are almost liquid-smooth from top to bottom, and present a soundstage across the front three speakers that is big and completely free from any apparent gaps. The crossover from front to back is equally seamless and the decades of experience with the Dual Concentric drivers makes itself apparent as well. The Precisions manage to produce a soundstage that's very even and free of pronounced sweet spots. Anyone sat remotely on-axis is going to be on the receiving end of a very convincing multichannel performance.



The gold-plated binding posts enable bi-wiring and a separate earth connection

This cohesiveness comes into its own when you select something like JJ Abrams' sci-fi smash *Super 8* – still something of a master-class Blu-ray disc in terms of going from periods of almost total silence with only sparse details to full-bore moments in barely the blink of an eye. Here, the Tannoys are in their element. The moment where the sheriff is abducted at the gas station is seriously impressive: the calm of the night, with only the ping of the fuel pump to grab attention, is shattered with lightning pace – all hell breaks loose and the Precisions are comfortable with all of it. In fact, the relative sensitivity of the speakers lends them a speed that means that when they need to go from near silence to full tilt, they do so almost instantaneously.

Another of the benefits of these wood fibre drivers is that even under extreme provocation they stay smooth, controlled and detailed



The Precision series' Dual Concentric drivers feature a 1in titanium tweeter with 'Tulip WaveGuide'



– and the integration with the titanium tweeters is extremely good as well. It is effectively impossible to tell when one ends and the other begins.

Dialogue delivery

Tannoy's newest speakers also have superb tonality. There's an ability with voices in particular that is genuinely convincing and some of this is clearly down to the 6C centre speaker. It might be a bit of a big beast, but the weight and scale that it gives to the onscreen dialogue is immensely effective, putting living, breathing actors right there in your room rather than squawking avatars.

This system can leave even very ballistic soundtracks – and they don't get much more ballistic than the Arnold Schwarzenegger retro actioner *The Last Stand* – sounding spacious and real, with utterly convincing panning effects courtesy of the

identical drivers employed across all models. Yet, at the same time, the Tannoys possess a sense of effortlessness. At no stage does their performance ever feel forced or showy – they simply take whatever material you present them with and make the best of it. I would never want to describe the Precision array as dull, but there is something wonderfully relaxed about its presentation that means it's superbly easy to listen to for long periods, compared to other speakers that can begin to tire with their puppyish energy. Music fans are therefore well-catered for, too. Both stereo and multichannel tracks come through with pleasing body and clarity.

By comparisons, criticisms are slight. Firstly, the Precisions are impressively sensitive but they are still fairly demanding on their amplification and will show up limitations further upstream. You'll want to match this £4,450 package with an AVR that packs a decent punch.

The other area where the system has to give some ground is the subwoofer. The TS2.12 is capable and can go impressively deep, but even set to a relatively low crossover I never felt it integrated perfectly with the Precision

'A very likeable and entertaining package – the Precisions are speakers that need to be on your shortlist'

cabinets. Yes, there are two drivers at work in the chassis – and the TS2.12 is surprisingly agile – but with the rest of the Tannoy cabinets offering such cohesion, it stuck out a little bit. Perhaps a more expensive design from a dedicated subwoofer brand would be worth investigating.

Likeable and entertaining

These are minor quibbles, though, and shouldn't detract from what is a very likeable and entertaining package. Overall, this 5.1 setup is able to cover the important bases. They are beautifully built and have a very handsome (black) aesthetic that should work well in most rooms you place them in. When you power up your AV receiver, they deliver a fantastic performance that is rich, real and extremely involving. And, as a true all-rounder, they are as happy giving a bit of a boost to Tuesday evening television as they are delivering a full-throttle movie night. When you consider their talent with music and their usefully compact dimensions (I'm ignoring the centre channel model...), the Precisions are speakers that need to be on your shortlist ■

SPECIFICATIONS

PRECISION 6.2

DRIVE UNITS: 1 x 6in Dual Concentric with 1in titanium tweeter; 1 x 6in midbass
ENCLOSURE: Rear-ported
FREQUENCY RESPONSE: 34Hz-35kHz
SENSITIVITY: 89dB
POWER HANDLING: 350W
DIMENSIONS: 283(w) x 1000(h) x 310(d)mm
WEIGHT: 18.4kg

PRECISION 6.1

DRIVE UNITS: 1 x 6in Dual Concentric with 1in titanium tweeter
ENCLOSURE: Rear-ported
FREQUENCY RESPONSE: 43Hz-35kHz
SENSITIVITY: 88dB
POWER HANDLING: 300W
DIMENSIONS: 224(w) x 330(d) x 257(d)mm
WEIGHT: 7.3kg

PRECISION 6C

DRIVE UNITS: 1 x 6in Dual Concentric with 1in titanium tweeter; 2 x 6in midbass (one passive)
ENCLOSURE: Passive radiator
FREQUENCY RESPONSE: 36Hz-35kHz
SENSITIVITY: 90dB
POWER HANDLING: 350W
DIMENSIONS: 585(w) x 237(h) x 256(d)mm
WEIGHT: 13kg

TS2.12 SUBWOOFER

DRIVE UNITS: 2 x 12in doped paper cones; one active, one passive
ENCLOSURE: Sealed
FREQUENCY RESPONSE: 21Hz-200Hz
ON BOARD POWER: 500W
REMOTE CONTROL: No
DIMENSIONS: 430(w) x 440(h) x 378(d)mm

HCC VERDICT



Tannoy Precision 5.1

→ £4,450 Approx → <http://tannoy.com>
 → Tel: 01236 420199

HIGHS: Refined yet potent sound; gorgeous aesthetics and sturdy build; mostly sensible dimensions

LOWS: Subwoofer not quite as capable as the speakers; centre is fairly large

Performance ★★★★★

Design ★★★★★

Features ★★★★★

Overall ★★★★★

Fresh-faced firepower

Denon wants to reinvigorate the humble receiver with its AVR-X4000, but does this next-generation offering live up to the legendary legacy of the brand? **Steve May** takes a listen

DENON HAS HIGH hopes for its 2013 X-series of AV receivers, with the new range boasting an unapologetically modernistic feature set and some welcome refinements, including a reworked user interface, clearer front panel display and hand-holding Setup Assistant to demystify installation. The model featured here tops the lineup, but at £1,200 and tipping the scales at 12.3kg, it's more cruiserweight than heavyweight.

The AVR-X4000 is a seven-channel design, but supports nine-channel processing should you want to lace up an additional stereo power amp. In the brand's AV stable, it lords it over the lookalike AVR-X3000, cheaper at £800, but looks up to the £2,300 AVR-4520.

Neat design

Cosmetically, this receiver is slick without being idiosyncratic. The fascia itself has a neat, brushed finish and lightweight symmetrical control knobs that frame a central trapdoor. The roof of the AVR sports a couple of plastic heat mats, secured over the front-facing vents with little plastic clips. These slightly ugly toupees are designed to prevent the roof of the unit exceeding predetermined temperature levels when the receiver is run at high volumes. Overly cautious perhaps, but Denon and Marantz have been using them for years.

Beneath the lid lurks Denon's Dynamic Discrete Surround Circuit D.D.S.C.-HD tech, plus Denon Link HD anti-jitter wizardry – the latter only comes into effect when partnered with a sibling Denon Link-toting Blu-ray player, and went untested during my audition. To optimise fidelity, signal paths have been minimised. The TI PCM1690 DAC used within is common to most of the X-series models.

The layout of the rear panel is measured and manageable. The horizontal speaker terminals are colour-coded and there's a sheet of matching labels provided in the box to help sort your cable spaghetti. The HDMI provision is generous, with six inputs (plus a seventh around the front), coupled to InstaPrevue



AV INFO

PRODUCT: Mid-range seven-channel AV receiver

POSITION: Leading the line of Denon's 2013 receivers, below the 2012-era AVR-4520

PEERS: Pioneer SC-LX57; Yamaha RX-A1030

thumbnail previews. There are three HDMI outs, two of which can serve the main viewing room, with an independent feed for a second zone (note that the InstaPrevue doesn't function when this Zone 2 HDMI output is active). The receiver can also distribute audio only to a third zone.

Room EQ is achieved via Audyssey's multiple-position MultEQ XT32 system and supplied mic. In terms of distance and level it proved pleasingly accurate in my room, but I still felt the need to make my own extra manual adjustments. Another Audyssey offering on the AVR-X4000 is LFC, which purports to control the dispersion of deep bass without adversely impacting the LFE performance in room. The system has seven levels of 'low frequency

containment,' but my advice is to avoid all of them like an Uxbridge nightclub on a Friday night. When engaged, pretty much every thud of bass is exercised from the soundtrack, leaving nothing but shrill squawking. I may have been playing *The Expendables 2* on the Blu-ray player, but my neighbours must have thought I was culling parakeets.

'There are plenty of useful features on board, including both Apple AirPlay and music service Spotify'

Thankfully, there're plenty of useful features on board, too, including Apple AirPlay and Spotify (in itself a rather exclusive combination). The latter's onscreen presentation is somewhat simplistic but it works well enough and for Spotify subscribers it'll hit the right notes.

Surround sound simplified

The boffins at Denon claim they've taken big strides in making its AVRs more approachable, and they're half right. The setup and main menus of the AVR-X4000 are easily navigated, enlivened with engaging graphics. But despite the refresh, some aspects of the receiver remain less than intuitive; you'll still need to consult the manual, which is supplied as a PDF on a CD ROM or as a download. >



The AVR-X4000 presents a minimalist front fascia – a pull-down flap conceals USB and HDMI inputs



With a name like 'X4000' you'd expect this receiver to be clad in spandex and boast secret superpowers, such as integrated Wi-Fi or Bluetooth streaming. But it doesn't. However, I suspect neither will be crucial to the type of serious home theatre buyer shortlisting this model. And this doesn't diminish the receiver's connected performance – the Denon shines when networked. Selecting the Network input brings up a collection of icons representing internet radio, Last.fm, Spotify, media servers and Flickr. It's DLNA 1.5 compliant and handles disparate codecs well; from USB and across a LAN it taps its feet to MP3, M4A/AAC, FLAC, WMA and WAV. Those running a music server NAS are well served.

You can experiment with height and width exotica (DTS Neo:X, Audyssey DSX and Dolby Pro-Logic IIz), although with only seven channels on hand, you'll need to forgo rear surround channels. The AVR also features a variety of picture presets plus a user mode which allows you to tune contrast, brightness, saturation, hue and noise reduction. Personally, I feel your source and display are the more logical calibration point.

Positive performance

The AVR-X4000's sonic characteristic is full-blooded but sweet – it's the musical equivalent of a Ferrero Rocher box. Digital's electro pop *Seraphim* (Angel Mix), streamed as a FLAC Studio Master from Linn Records, is rich and glutinous. And call me a heathen, but I preferred the receiver's multichannel stereo presentation to its direct two-channel delivery.

Indeed, the immersive nature of the AVR-X4000's surround

The AVR-X4000 has six rear HDMI inputs (and one on the front panel), plus three HDMI outputs

soundfield is a consistent joy. When tuned into Sky Sports' F1 HD race coverage, transmitted in Dolby Digital 5.1, my viewing room sounded as if under siege from angry bees. Engines were panned front to back, left and right, in a glorious cacophony.

With pumped-up actioners, like the aforementioned *...Expendables 2* and its DTS-HD MA 7.1 mix, the AVR-X4000 stomps around like a belligerent teenager, kicking cans and debris into every corner of the room with gusto. As Sly and his team unleash their ordnance, the Denon responds with quick-fire transients. It's impossible to suppress a grin at its antics, even though centre channel dialogue delivery occasionally sounds a tad polite. Clarity and definition remain admirable.

The amplifier is rated at 125W (into 8ohms) with all channels driven. While not an out-and-out volume monster, it doesn't strain when cranked loud; the integrity of the soundstage isn't compromised, remaining classy and controlled across the range.

Overall, the AVR-X4000 delivers on its modern promise. It may lack the wild invention of Sony's STR-DA5800ES and the astounding dynamics of Arcam's FMJ AVR750, but both those models compete in price divisions a magnitude higher than this well-behaved slugger. I would have liked to see THX post-processing, and find the operating logic at times inscrutable, but this model's forward-looking feature set has undeniable appeal. And it's indisputably a fine-sounding receiver for the price ■



Uncluttered compared to some AVR handsets – you can also use the free app

ON THE MENU



→ Denon's AVR-X4000 features a new simplified Setup Assistant to demystify the receiver installation. However, the operating logic remaining inscrutable and unintuitive at times – shame there's no printed manual supplied

SPECIFICATIONS

DOLBY TRUEHD: Yes. Plus Dolby Digital Pro-Logic IIz

DTS-HD MASTER AUDIO: Yes. Plus DTS Neo:X

THX: No

MULTICHANNEL INPUT: No

MULTICHANNEL OUTPUT: 7 x 125W (8ohms)

MULTIROOM: Yes. Three zones

HDMI: 7 x inputs; 3 x outputs

COMPONENT VIDEO: 2 x inputs; 1 x output

AV INPUTS: 5 x composite; 4 x digital audio (2 x optical and 2 x coaxial)

VIDEO UPSCALING: Yes. To 4K

DIMENSIONS: 434(w) x 378(d) x 187(h)mm

WEIGHT: 12.3kg

ALSO FEATURING: Audyssey's MultEQ XT32 audio calibration and LFC; Audyssey DSX processing; HDMI passthrough; Apple iOS and Android control apps; DLNA 1.5 media playback; Ethernet; USB; AirPlay; vTuner; Spotify; Flickr; D.D.S.C-HD; Denon Link HD; AL24 Processing Plus; HDMI InstaPrevue; nine-channel pre-out

HCC VERDICT



Denon AVR-X4000

→ £1,200 Approx → www.denon.co.uk

→ Tel: (0)2890 279830

HIGHS: Engaging multichannel delivery; generous connectivity; excellent network streaming and content support; versatile multiroom options

LOWS: At times, almost too refined; no Bluetooth; ugly remote; not quite as intuitive as Denon would have us believe; only seven channels of amplification

Performance ★★★★★

Design ★★★★★

Features ★★★★★

Overall ★★★★★

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Crystal-clear delivery

Adam Rayner auditions some German-engineered speakers that impress with their technical innovations and detailed multichannel performance

REGULAR READERS WILL know that as well as home cinema, I also have a passion for automotive audio and cars in general. In that field, while many admire the exotic Italian offerings from the likes of Lamborghini and Ferrari, there's a similar passion for the German marques. BMW, Mercedes-Benz, Porsche – all are praised for their sheer engineering innovation. And if these speakers are anything to go by, the same national stereotypes could apply equally to home cinema. Quadral may not be as desirable a brand as, say, Italy's Zingali, but I like its attitude. It makes well-built speakers with some neat technical tricks.

Quadral started back in 1972. It first became famous for some huge and very high-fidelity speakers called Titan (part of the Aurum sub-brand) and now has ten different lines of loudspeakers, addressing pretty much every urge and performance bracket. These, the Signo Avantgarde, while quietly bearing evidence of serious skull-sweat, are priced at the top level of what might be described as a mid-market product. The system reviewed here retails for £3,300.

Driven to distraction

The front speakers in this 5.1 package, the Signo Avantgarde 70s, are the second-biggest in the range, below the 80s. They have two sizes of driver – a pair of 6.5in units and a tweeter. The Signo Avantgarde 10 Base centre channel speaker also packs three drivers; the same tweeter and two 5.25ins. The standmount Signo Avantgarde 20 bears a single 5.25in to go with its HF driver.

So far, so 'normal'. But a closer inspection of the specifications reveals that the passive crossovers inside the speakers are a bit fabulous. Each speaker with more than two transducers in it has two crossover points. This means, for instance, that one of the drivers in the Signo Avantgarde 70 is focused

on just 300Hz and down, while the other gets fed a 300Hz to 2,600Hz passband.

This explains why Quadral refers to the Signo Avantgarde 70 floorstander, and its centre channel brethren, as three-way designs (the bigger floorstander, the 80, has an extra, different-sized mid-range driver so is more obviously a three-way speaker). I did, however, have to phone the distributors to clarify the point, as the brand's website is far from packed with detail. Quadral talks about its technologies in hushed terms and gives nothing away, leaving the ordinary consumer with little understanding of the research and development that's gone into these cabinets. A pity.

For instance, Quadral says nothing whatsoever about the front baffle of these towers leaning back a few degrees. After unpacking and installing, I was fretting that my floor had finally collapsed after nearly 20 years of home cinema onslaught. But no, this is time-phase alignment by way of cabinet construction, positioning the tweeter a little further back, so as to 'appear' sonically the same distance from the listeners' ears for greater coherency.

In a bind

The enclosures bear twin sets of binding posts to their rears that feel a little raw-cut and hard-edged but are perfect for biting on bare cables as well as grudgingly accepting my fitted banana plugs. They arrive with stripped-end speaker wire jumpers. The tweeter alone is fed via one set and both the midbass and mid-range drivers are on the other set, should you decide to bi-wire or bi-amp.



The Signo Avantgarde speakers feature a smart design and solid build

AV INFO

PRODUCT:
5.1 floorstanding
speaker array

POSITION:
In the middle of
Quadral's ten-
product lineup

PEERS:
Dali Ikon 6 MkII;
KEF R100 5.1;
B&W CM8





The Signo Avantgarde range utilises proprietary ring-radiator Titanium tweeters

The speakers are nicely styled. Here, in their white finish (black is also an option) they present an aura of ice-cool charm, with the chrome name-plate perched on top of the front baffle adding a touch of class.

Sing along with Sting

I played some music that I know every note of, a Sting DTS 5.1 CD, and quickly recognised this system was of a high quality. Super-fast transients – the sounds that smear on lesser

'The snap, attack, clarity and grip of these drivers is superb, creating a wonderfully coherent soundfield'

speakers – are all in order here. The very first and hardest part of any ping, clunk, thud or bang got me between the eyes with superb precision.

I then moved on to Disney's *Wreck-It Ralph* on Blu-ray, which has a DTS-HD MA soundmix that I adore, and the Quadral's showed off their detailing. Moments like Ralph going to his bed on a pile of broken bricks, raining down a barrage of blows into

the pile to create a nest, were absurdly clean and crisp.

The quirky-looking tweeter is particularly impressive, providing effortless high frequencies with plenty of energy. A ring-radiator design, and proprietary to Quadral, each has a hard ring of Titanium, held at the inner and outer edges on a fabric suspension, with a fibre nose in the middle that – like the squares of foam stuck onto the faces of M&K Sound's S150 MkIIs (reviewed last issue) – serves to control the output by physical absorption.

The cones of the rest of the system are described as being Titanium-Polypropylene. While the latter is cheap, the former isn't and however the two are actually blended together, it works. The snap, attack, clarity and grip of these drivers is superb, and the created soundfield is just wonderfully coherent; hanging in space, not coming from the speakers at all. Slam and scale in the midband made loud knocking and vocal sounds really leap out. These speakers are masterful right where our ears work best.

Low-frequency limits

Enough of the cartoons. Next in my player was *The Dark Knight Rises*, even though the Bane character is just annoying. And here is where I found that in my room, with this system, the Qube 10 subwoofer that forms the .1 of this array was just not able to keep up with the rest.

A 10in woofer powered by a 200W amp, the Qube 10 certainly looks great with its metallic face-plate but compared to the other speakers is a bit primitive. It sports a classic downward-firing design, with the enclosure's feet raising it off the floor so it can be used as a boundary to pressurise against its cone, and is ported via a simple slot in the rear. This is really Stone Age bass tech and the amp panel, other than a fully sweepable phase knob, offers little to excite.

It turned out to be the weak link. Despite having a creditable performance, aided by a soft clipping and limiting circuit, even on a mild setting I felt it reached its limits. With this array, I imagine Quadral's bigger (12in) and more powerful (500W) subwoofer would be a better choice.

Overall, though, I'm still deeply impressed by the Quadral set (although I would also warn against driving them too hard, as the sound became a little harsh when I went full steam ahead on the volume knob). Music performance and fidelity is first-rate – these will be perfect for jazz fans and those who like complex soundtracks packed with detail; if you go to Planet Pandora, for instance, James Cameron's all-encompassing jungle will be seriously scary.

Lovers of crisp sound quality, impressive potency and superb design and engineering should apply ■

SPECIFICATIONS

SIGNO AVANTGARDE 70

DRIVE UNITS: 1 x 1in annular ring Titanium tweeter; 2 x 6.5in Titanium-Polypropylene midbass drivers

ENCLOSURE: Three-way, rear ported
FREQUENCY RESPONSE: 30Hz-50kHz

SENSITIVITY: 88dB

POWER HANDLING: 150W

DIMENSIONS: 203(w) x 956(h) x 315(d)mm

WEIGHT: 16.7kg

SIGNO AVANTGARDE 10 BASE

DRIVE UNITS: 1 x 1in annular ring Titanium tweeter; 2 x 5.25in Titanium-Polypropylene midbass drivers

ENCLOSURE: Three-way, rear ported
FREQUENCY RESPONSE: 49Hz-50kHz

SENSITIVITY: 88dB

POWER HANDLING: 160W

DIMENSIONS: 550(w) x 188(h) x 270(d)mm

WEIGHT: 8.34kg

SIGNO AVANTGARDE 20

DRIVE UNITS: 1 x 1in annular ring Titanium tweeter; 1 x 5.25in Titanium-Polypropylene midbass driver

ENCLOSURE: Two-way, rear ported
FREQUENCY RESPONSE: 49Hz-50kHz

SENSITIVITY: 86dB

POWER HANDLING: 90W

DIMENSIONS: 177(w) x 309(h) x 270(d)mm

WEIGHT: 5.28kg

QUBE 10

DRIVE UNITS: 1 x 10in 'long stroke' high-excursion driver

ENCLOSURE: Ported

FREQUENCY RESPONSE: 22Hz-200Hz
ON BOARD POWER: 200W

REMOTE CONTROL: No

DIMENSIONS: 320(w) x 420(h) x 390(d)mm

WEIGHT: 16.5kg

CONNECTIONS: Paired phono L/R inputs (use of a 'Y' lead for mono LFE recommended); high-level speaker inputs

HCC VERDICT



Quadral Signo Avantgarde 5.1

→ £3,300 Approx → www.quadralgb-ie.co.uk

→ Tel: 01785 748 446

HIGHS: Fabulous placement; clarity with vocals and effects; excellent dynamics; beautiful design and rugged build

LOWS: The Qube 10 subwoofer is just not as sophisticated as the rest of the array

Performance ★★★★★

Design ★★★★★

Features ★★★★★

Overall ★★★★★



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PVR burns bright

This impressive Freeview+ HD PVR and Blu-ray archiving combi is also loaded with Smart features, although **Grant Rennell** reckons it's not quite a jack of all trades

PANASONIC CURRENTLY STANDS

alone in producing decks capable of both recording Freeview programmes to hard disk and archiving them to Blu-ray, and the DMR-BWT735 is its latest such offering. Burning content to disc may seem an old-school concept – this deck does, however, feature state-of-the-art Smart functionality.

Accommodating a disc drive and a 1TB hard disk means the DMR-BWT735 is a fairly large unit, although it has a minimalist design aesthetic similar to its stablemates. The fascia flips open (automatically when inserting/ejecting discs) to reveal the disc drive tray, USB port and SD card slot.

The backplate has an HDMI output, optical and coaxial digital audio outputs and stereo

phonos. There's no Scart output but an input can be used to capture video from external kit in composite or S-video quality. Also present is a second USB port, an Ethernet port (Wi-Fi is built-in) and an aerial loopthrough. The remote isn't short of buttons but logical grouping, colour-coding and shortcuts make it reasonably intuitive to use.

Compared to other PVRs we've tested recently, the UI is rather plain-looking. It is easy enough to navigate, though – thanks again in part to those shortcut buttons.

The EPG can display seven-day data in grid form for all channels, favourites or sorted by category. You can schedule automatic series recordings and set up recordings via the EPG or – including from external kit – using a manual

timer or by pressing record when watching a programme. Live TV can be paused for up to 90 minutes.

Panasonic lets you specify quality settings and record two channels (or from one internal tuner and an external source) at once, including while playing a recording or disc. Disappointingly, you can't record while archiving, converting, using the apps portal or playing externally-located media files.

Recordings (and internally-stored media) appear in the Direct Navigator menu where they can be sorted by type (eg. drama) and edited by excising chunks or dividing them up. You can also create chapters and disc menus.

DR-quality recordings (pretty much 'as broadcast') can be converted afterwards while

Panasonic's deck allows archiving to Blu-ray disc

AV INFO

PRODUCT:
Blu-ray player/PVR
with 1TB HDD

POSITION:
Top of Panasonic's
PVR range

PEERS:
Pure Avalon 300R;
Humax DTR-T1010;
Samsung
BD-F8500



other quality settings are HG, HX, HE, HL and HM for HD, and XP, SP, LP, and EP for SD recordings. There's an FR ('flexible recording') mode for external recordings.

For those eager to make the most use of space, up to 684 hours of recordings can be stored internally or 35 hours on a dual-layer Blu-ray disc using the HM setting. This shifts to 1,724 hours/84 hours using the EP mode, although image quality is visibly 'blocky' at the lower settings, HD included.

Material can be exported to a USB drive but once 'registered', drives can't be used with equipment other than the BWT735.

IQ test

As a Smart machine, the DMR-BWT735 is savvy with numerous media file formats, be they located internally or on USB drives, discs, SD cards or DLNA networked storage. Playlist and slideshow support is offered. It will also convert 2D video (excluding live TV) to 3D, yet the effect is generally underwhelming.

I successfully accessed files on a networked Windows 7-equipped laptop and Western Digital MyBook World II NAS drive, but found MKV streaming to be unsupported. I also got enjoyment from one of the DMR-BWT735's neat tricks – acting as a DLNA server, sharing files and TV (in SD quality only) with other devices, here a Panasonic ET60 LED TV.

A free DIGA Player app for Android/iOS mobiles/tablets can be used to control the box, browse the EPG, stream live and recorded TV over a network and schedule recordings via the web.

Upscaled to 1080p, SD and HD Freeview broadcasts are convincingly sharpened. Though a little smeary, video captured using the composite Scart output from my Virgin Media TiVo box was perfectly watchable.

Blu-ray playback is no cause for concern – punchy, sharp and with plenty of detail evident during even the murkier moments of *The Dark Knight* and *Blade Runner: The Final Cut*.

As a playback and recording device the DMR-BWT735 is therefore easy to recommend, but the Viera Connect apps portal lets the side down a little bit. It currently includes catch-up TV from BBC iPlayer only, whereas rival PVR and Blu-ray deck makers are adding the likes of Demand 5. Making up for this is the presence of YouTube, Netflix, Facebook, Twitter, Skype and – most useful of all – a superior Rovi EPG from which you can also schedule recordings. However, Panasonic's lack of LoveFilm might annoy some.

So if you're looking for an all-in-one Freeview recorder/archiver and media centre, the DMR-BWT735 is a capable machine at a price that's about right – it's just not quite as Smart as you might hope ■

ON THE MENU



→ The Panasonic's UI isn't especially glamorous but still very accessible. Recordings appear in the Direct Navigator menu with info including whether they're copy protected; the Freeview EPG is a basic grid affair, but a superior Rovi guide can be called upon

SPECIFICATIONS

MULTIREGION: No. Region B BD/R2 DVD

UPSCALING: Yes. To 1080p

HDD: Yes. 1TB

TUNER: Yes. 2 x Freeview HD

3D: Yes. Plus 2D to 3D conversion

CONNECTIONS: HDMI output; coaxial digital audio output, optical digital audio output; Ethernet; 2 x USB inputs; SD card slot; Scart input

DOLBY TRUE HD/DTS-HD DECODING: Yes

DOLBY TRUE HD/DTS-HD BITSTREAM: Yes

DIMENSIONS: 430(w) x 59(h) x 249(d)mm

WEIGHT: 3.1kg

FEATURES: Built-in Wi-Fi; seven-day EPG; HDD stores up to 684 hours of HD recordings (HM mode)/1,724 hours of SD TV (using EP mode); automatic series recording; favourites lists; 90-minute live pause; recording transfer to disc and USB drives; recording editing and chapter creation; Viera Connect portal with BBC iPlayer, Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Skype, Netflix and Rovi EPG; media playback from USB/SD card/DLNA-networked storage; media server functionality; DIGA Player compatible

HCC VERDICT



Panasonic DMR-BWT735

→ £500 Approx → www.panasonic.co.uk

→ Tel: 0844 8443 899

HIGHS: Freeview recording/Blu-ray archiving in one; extensive smart features; value for money

LOWES: You can't record while using the apps portal or player's DLNA functionality; more catch-up TV would be nice

Performance ★★★★★

Design ★★★★★

Features ★★★★★

Overall ★★★★★

ROCK STEADY...



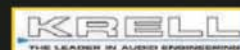
Since its inception, home theatre has presented tasks to high-end audio designers that challenge them in ways not seen before in a two-channel, analogue milieu. Digital surround sound processing directly confronted traditionalist music lovers, too, who felt that it compromised the purity of true high-end performance.

The wizards at Krell responded with a "clean sheet" approach, by delivering home theatre control centres to satisfy all purist criteria. The Foundation 7.1-Channel AV Processor is the latest in that long line, offering everything needed to master today's myriad viewing formats – from Blu-ray to 3D pass-through to TVs with built-in streaming – while maintaining Krell's exacting standards for analogue audio reproduction.



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The AV receiver market hots up when you hit the £500 mark, with networking and multizone features coming into play. **Adrian Justins** wires up a quartet of contenders

£500 AVR showdown!

DENON AVR-X2000

A revamped UI and Spotify are among the highlights here

ONKYO TX-NR626

Built-in Wi-Fi and Bluetooth, and with a price cut, too

PIONEER VSX-923

The best control app in the business – but is that enough?

YAMAHA RX-V675

Packed with DSP modes and offering a detailed sound

Master of the fine arts

Denon's sleek-looking receiver combines engrossing audio with network audio talents



THE AVR-X2000 HAS by far the coolest model name in this cabal, but sadly the fascia is not as exciting, although its button arrangement, large source select and volume knobs are nicely symmetrical. And if marks were given for the tidiness of a rear panel's socketry layout, the AVR-X2000 would score highly, sensibly locating all similar types together. Its binding-post speaker terminals will accept banana plugs and feel more robust than the other machines on test here. Unusually, each pair is placed horizontally, which makes them much easier to use.

This is a 7.1 affair, with the capability of running a second audio zone. Sadly, there's only one HDMI output and none of the six inputs are DSD compatible, meaning SACDs have to be streamed in PCM. There is no digital coaxial input, yet there are two composite video inputs – plain daft in this day and age. Nor is there Wi-Fi or Bluetooth, but the latter is compensated for by AirPlay, plus an iPod-controlling front USB. Build quality is good.

The remote control is minimalist for an AVR, with just 40 well-labelled and nicely responsive buttons, which makes it the easiest machine here to operate by far, especially in low light.

The alternative Denon iOS app is a slick affair too, although annoyingly, it doesn't allow access to the setup menu and sound modes.

Winning the GUI wars by miles, the Denon's operating system is much-needed proof that audio manufacturers can match their screen counterparts when it comes to creating attractive, contemporary-looking menus with high-res graphics and fonts that don't seem to pixellate.

The AVR-X2000's networking capabilities are impressive, with Last.fm and Spotify clients, a Flickr app (although its usefulness is severely limited in that it rarely shows photos in their correct aspect ratio) and a media server. There's also a nifty 'net radio feature, which has folders labelled BBC, Popular Stations and Largest Cities, making the likes of BBC 5Live and Classic FM just a couple of clicks away. The media server is superior too, telling you if a folder's contents won't play and nicely showing album art and file properties. Compatibility includes FLAC, WAV, M4A and MP3.

Engrossing audio

The AVR-X2000 does a first-rate job with all sources, totally engrossing you from the start with fast, accurate delivery. It manages to eke out a smidgen more detail in the effects of *Jack the Giant Slayer's* DTS-HD MA track than

its rivals here. The sheep scene's rain sounds clearer, the falling rocks sound sharper and Ewan MacGregor's breathing sounds heavier. There's also a pleasing warmth to the sound overall, with dialogue especially benefiting. Jamie Foxx's slurring and Leonardo DiCaprio's southern drawl projecting just that little bit more efficiently in *Django Unchained*. And when the action goes up a gear the amp is more than comfortable with the gunshots and explosions at the end. The D may be silent but the AVR-X2000 certainly isn't.

SPECIFICATIONS

DOLBY TRUEHD: Yes
DTS-HD MASTER AUDIO: Yes
THX: No
MULTICHANNEL INPUT: No
MULTICHANNEL OUTPUT (CLAIMED): 7 x 150W (6ohms)
MULTIROOM: Yes, Zone 2
AV INPUTS: 2 x composite; 2 x optical digital audio
HDMI: 6 x inputs; 1 x output
VIDEO UPSCALING: Yes, To 4K
COMPONENT VIDEO: 1 x input
DIMENSIONS: 434(w) x 330(d) x 167(h)mm
WEIGHT: 9.5kg
ALSO FEATURING: iOS and Android control apps; Ethernet; AirPlay; DLNA 1.5 certified; Windows 8/RT compatible; vTuner Internet radio; Spotify; Last.fm; JPEG photo streaming; Flickr; audio file playback via Ethernet or USB; Audio Return Channel; Audyssey MultEQ XT; Dolby Pro-Logic IIz

Connected contender

Onkyo's TX-NR626 is unique in providing integrated Bluetooth and Wi-Fi



THE £500 RECEIVER arena is fiercely contested and Onkyo has spiced things up by chopping £100 off the launch price of the TX-NR626, giving it a serious fiscal advantage. In terms of specification the Onkyo claims a power output of 160W per channel (into 6ohms) and an extensive complement of sockets including nine sets of speaker terminals, catering for various configurations. There are two HDMI outputs and although AirPlay is absent, the feather in its connectivity cap is the provision of Bluetooth and Wi-Fi, with the latter combining nicely with an iOS/Android app to stream hi-res lossless audio from smartphones and tablets.

This app also fulfils all remote control duties if you should tire of the handset, which is about two thirds the size of regular AVR remotes and has a complex layout with titchy non-backlit buttons.

Network services are more extensive than most, including some DLNA action, plus Spotify's subscription service, Last.fm, Aupeol!, MP3 Tunes, Simfy and the excellent TuneIn internet radio client.

The Denon may scoop the award for the best-designed back panel but Onkyo takes the prize for the neatest looking frontage with low-profile buttons and a

flat, smooth fascia. It's about the best that can be said for the look of any of these AVRs, which won't be appearing in any design museums.

Stupidly, the AVR's MHL-compatible HDMI socket is located on the rear panel. Otherwise, setting up and using the TX-NR626 is a pleasant enough experience, thanks to the layout and appearance of the OSD. The graphical icons and text aren't as polished as the Denon's but the folder structure is logical and intuitive. One nice touch is the InstaPrevue window, which shows thumbnails of up to four incoming HDMI signals.

Ready to rumble

When setting up, the amp asks you to adjust your sub's level to a very precise 75dB before proceeding to execute a lengthy Audyssey MultEQ calibration process. At the end you can specify which sound curve you prefer with Movie, Music or Off options.

The TX-NR626 is a well-oiled machine aside from the Bluetooth integration, which requires you to press a button on the front of the amp. Pairing can be painfully slow. Still, it's great being able to stream music from a phone via the Onkyo app, with album artwork nicely displayed on the TV screen. Audio quality is excellent, with an AIFF version of Radiohead's *Fake Plastic Trees* sounding beautifully clear and resonant.

SPECIFICATIONS

DOLBY TRUEHD: Yes
DTS-HD MASTER AUDIO: Yes
THX: No
MULTICHANNEL INPUT: No
MULTICHANNEL OUTPUT (CLAIMED): 7 x 160W (6ohms)
MULTIROOM: Yes. Zone 2
AV INPUTS: 4 x composite;; 3 x digital audio (1 x optical, 2 x coaxial)
HDMI: 6 x inputs; 2 x outputs
VIDEO UPSCALING: Yes. To 4K
COMPONENT VIDEO: 1 x input
DIMENSIONS: 435(w) x 328(d) x 174(h)mm
WEIGHT: 10.0kg
ALSO FEATURING: Apple OS and Android control apps; Ethernet; Wi-Fi; Bluetooth; DLNA 1.5 certified; Spotify; Last.fm; TuneIn, Simfy, Aupeol!, MP3 tunes; DSD; audio file playback via USB/LAN; 6 x stereo phono inputs; Audyssey MultEQ XT; Audyssey Dynamic EQ; Dolby Pro-Logic IIz

Movie performance is terrific, too, if a little more concerned with punch rather than poise. With the nighttime attack on Django and Dr Schultz's empty camp, the amp deftly handles the shooting, explosions and screams with shots whizzing round the rears more accurately than the hero's pistol work. Plenty of clarity to the squelchy leaves, knife-cutting and eerie-sounding crows helps generate a sense of foreboding. And when the giant picks up Eddie Marsan in *Jack the Giant Slayer* you can practically smell the beast's rotten breath coming through the rears.



Desirable digital diva

With its eight HDMI inputs, Pioneer's AVR is ready for all your sources



THE DESIGN OF the Pioneer VSX-923 screams of the bog-standard 2013 AVR look, which is not a bad thing, just nothing to get overly excited about. Twin knobs on the fascia control inputs and volume, whilst Pioneer has quaintly found space for a composite video input on the front. The VSX-923 also compares favourably with the rest of this AVR quartet in terms of its spec, give or take the odd input and networking service. There's the *de rigueur* presence of an internet radio client, no fewer than eight HDMI inputs (including an MHL-ready one on the front – Onkyo, take note), nine Banana plug-compatible binding post speaker terminals, DLNA networking, AirPlay for streaming from portable Apple products and HTC connect.

The front USB socket affords iPod control if required and although Wi-Fi and Bluetooth are missing you can invest in optional USB adaptors should Ethernet or AirPlay not meet your needs. Negatives include the absence of Spotify (or any other kind of online music streaming subscription service), but Pioneer assures me that by the time you read this it will be available as a firmware update. Fans of hi-res audio will be pleased by the presence of 192kHz/24-bit WAV, AIFF and FLAC compatibility, but sadly DSD didn't make the cut. In all in all though, with 4K

passthrough and upscaling onboard, there isn't much vital that the Pioneer VSX-923 can't do – even if you may have to splash some extra cash (£50 per adapter) to do so.

The iControl AV2013 app laughs in the face of all other apps in terms of its design. You could happily play with the virtual volume knob or watch the bouncing spheres in the balance control all day.

This app is poles apart from the supplied handset, which is one of the least user-friendly remotes I've come across. Square edges and a lightweight plastic feel are compounded by the presence of 68 tiny buttons, many of which have dual uses. The keys will glow (kind of) in low light but in anything other than a well-lit room operation is a challenge. Nor does the VSX-923 cover itself in glory as far as onscreen menus are concerned. Things look jagged and clunky rather than generating a feel-good feeling.

Still, the MCACC EQ program works efficiently to prime the amp ready for some serious home cinema action. The DTS-HD MA soundtrack to *Jack the Giant Slayer* has a marginally artificial timbre that gives it a hint of harshness but there's no arguing with the receiver's power and steering ability. When the giant chef in the

SPECIFICATIONS

DOLBY TRUEHD: Yes
DTS-HD MASTER AUDIO: Yes
THX: No

MULTICHANNEL INPUT: No
MULTICHANNEL OUTPUT (CLAIMED): 7 x 150W (6ohms)

MULTIROOM: Yes. Zone 2
AV INPUTS: 4 x composite; 2 x digital audio (1 x optical, 1 x coaxial)

HDMI: 8 x inputs; 2 x outputs
VIDEO UPSCALING: Yes. To 4K
COMPONENT VIDEO: 1 x input

DIMENSIONS: 435(w) x 363(d) x 168(h)mm
WEIGHT: 9.7kg

ALSO FEATURING: Apple OS and Android control apps; Ethernet; AirPlay; DLNA 1.5 certified; Windows 8 compatible; vTuner Internet radio; audio file playback via USB/LAN; 4 x stereo phono inputs; MCACC auto setup; PQLS; Advanced Sound Retriever; Dolby Pro-Logic IIz

kitchen chops the herbs you're treated to the whoosh of the panning blade and flying shreds. Then, when Jack attacks him, implements fly all around the room. On *Django's* Dolby TrueHD soundtrack, meanwhile, when Django shoots the whipping slavedriver I practically winced as the whip crackled, arriving with pin-sharp accuracy at each speaker in turn. At the end of the movie, the AVR masters the transition between Django's dialogue to the burning fuse and pyrotechnics as the house goes up in smoke. Everything is delivered with the right degree of power.

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DSP party monster

Can the multiple sound modes of Yamaha's RX-V675 overcome a few feature shortfalls?



IN TERMS OF specifications Yamaha's mid-range AVR struggles a bit to match the rest of our group test challengers. Seven binding-post speaker terminals are complemented by spring-clip affairs for running a second zone or additional presence channels, while AV connectivity comprises six HDMI inputs but only the one (ARC and 3D compatible) HDMI output. At least the MHL-compatible HDMI input is placed front of house on the amp's fascia, providing convenient access for Android tablet and smartphone owners wanting to watch HD video clips. The HD theme extends to streamed audio, too, with support for 192kHz/24-bit resolution FLAC and WAV tunes played over a network and compatibility with DSD input via HDMI from an SACD player.

Like its rivals, 4K upscaling/passthrough is onboard but, like the Pioneer, Wi-Fi and Bluetooth are only achievable via additional adapters. Owners of Apple devices, however, can stream tunes from the get-go thanks to AirPlay.

Aesthetically, the RX-V675 is by no means ugly but its random placement of different sizes and types of buttons can hardly be called good design practice. The remote control sits nicely in the hand and sports a two-tone look that almost makes up for the ridiculous number of functions squeezed on to it. At the

risk of sounding like a broken record, this remote is over-populated. Finding the right button from the 80-strong array is no mean feat, especially in low light. And, at times, the onscreen menu system has the same illogical and random feel as the amp's front panel.

Salvation comes in the form of an excellent app. The Yamaha AV control app is slicker than a duck's back in a monsoon and makes it easy and enjoyable to access menu-based features. For example, when choosing from the 17 DSP modes (some great, some not), each has a nice picture as a thumbnail that the mediocre onscreen GUI can't properly show.

Spotify doesn't feature but Napster is provided, as is an internet radio service, which isn't the easiest to search but does have an intriguing folder of random podcasts from many stations.

Speaker setup is performed by using the YPAO calibration microphone with Reflected Sound Control. Distances and levels were amongst the most accurate of this quartet (not that any were badly out).

In terms of performance the RX-V675 betrays a slight lack of warmth but Blu-rays are

nonetheless a pleasure to hear and no detail is lost. As Elmont, Crawe and Jack try and catch the sheep in the pond in *Jack The Giant Slayer*, the rain feels like it's coming down the walls behind you and thunder sounds ominously across the room; as the rope net catches Jack and Crawe you'll feel its scrape across the rocks. Meanwhile, the three brothers scene in *Django Unchained* is endowed by the atmospheric singing of birds, and Jamie Foxx's dialogue is given much needed air. It's a crisp, clear sound.

SPECIFICATIONS

DOLBY TRUEHD: Yes

DTS-HD MASTER AUDIO: Yes

THX: No

MULTICHANNEL INPUT: No

MULTICHANNEL OUTPUT (CLAIMED): 7 x 125W (8ohms)

MULTIROOM: Yes. Zone 2

AV INPUTS: 5 x composite; 4 x digital audio (2 x optical and 2 x coaxial)

HDMI: 6 x inputs; 1 x output

VIDEO UPSCALING: Yes. To 4K

COMPONENT VIDEO: 2 x inputs; 1 x output

DIMENSIONS: 435(w) x 171(d) x 364(h)mm

WEIGHT: 10.0kg

ALSO FEATURING: Virtual Presence Speaker; Compressed music enhancer; DSD; multiple DSP modes; audio file playback via USB/DLNA; iOS and Android control apps; AirPlay; vTuner internet radio; Napster; Ethernet; analogue stereo phono in x 4; analogue stereo phono out; inputs for Wi-Fi and Bluetooth adapters; USB input; YPAO mic calibration socket

Final standings

THESE RECEIVERS OFFER an affordable entry point for the enthusiast looking to get serious home cinema, albeit on a budget. Models at this £400-£500 price are well equipped to deliver convincing seven-channel surround sound excitement with plenty of power, heavy-duty speaker terminals, a surfeit of 4K-compatible HDMI connectivity and HD decoding. Setup is aided by acoustic measurement microphones and manufacturers are keen to provide extras such as AirPlay or Bluetooth, Spotify and internet radio services.

THE YAMAHA RX-V675 does a fine job at unspooling Blu-ray and hi-res audio sources, with a detailed, airy delivery, and it doesn't have any obvious connectivity shortcomings. But the mediocre resolution of the GUI and cluttered nature of the remote conspire to make operating it little fun (after all, not everyone wants to use a tablet or smartphone app). Similar criticisms can be laid at the feet of the Pioneer VSX-923, which is little more enjoyable to use than the Yamaha, with a pig of a remote control and an ugly, poorly laid-out GUI. Again, a smartphone app provides a superior experience. Both models offer Wi-Fi and Bluetooth via optional USB adapters but at least have AirPlay onboard. The Pioneer's sound is slightly more focused.

The Denon AVR-X2000's remote control and onscreen menu system are without

parallel, and it has a great selection of online services, yet it can't quite compete in the features department, lacking Wi-Fi, Bluetooth and DSD compatibility. And it only has the one HDMI output, which makes it something of a pariah at this price point. Sound-wise, though, the Denon is spot-on, with the most likeable audio in our roundup.

Although a little brash, the Onkyo TX-NR626 is certainly no muppet either when it comes to multichannel sonics. Furthermore, its operating system and remote control are pretty pleasing to deal with, the smartphone app also streams audio via Wi-Fi, and Bluetooth makes a handy backup for non-smart devices. Internet radio, Spotify, Last.fm, DLNA... the Onkyo has them all, and more. And, critically, it sells for just £400, which makes it hard to ignore ■

PARTNERS IN CRIME



Sub/sat systems: The affordable AVRs auditioned here are mainly targeted at living-room setups – the kind of environment where floorstanding speakers might not be tolerated. Thankfully, the AV market is crammed with good-looking and great-sounding sub/sat packages that will fit the bill.

Monitor Audio MASS 5.1: This £800 array includes five identical, angular satellite speakers and a keg-shaped 10in, 220W subwoofer – performance is exemplary for the price, with clean high frequencies, a fulsome mid-range and plenty of LFE punch. The optional stands make room installation simple.

KEF E305: Available in both black and white finishes and totting sumptuous curves, KEF's 'egg'-inspired 5.1 package (£900, pictured) is ultra living-room friendly. But this is not a case of style over substance, with the brand's UniQ drivers creating a cohesive, accurate soundstage with plenty of impact.

Tannoy HTS-101: Retailing for around £400, this diminutive array is great value, even if its smallscale satellites and boxy subwoofer don't exact scream 'stylish'. Instead, your money gets you a potent, energetic performer that can be driven surprisingly hard without fear and will always put a smile on your face.

HCC VERDICT



Denon AVR-X2000

→ £500 Approx → www.denon.co.uk
→ Tel: (0)2890 279830

HIGHS: High-quality graphic user interface; nice remote control; AirPlay onboard; highly detailed sound
LOWS: No Wi-Fi, DSD or Bluetooth provision; limited app controller; single HDMI output and no coaxial terminals



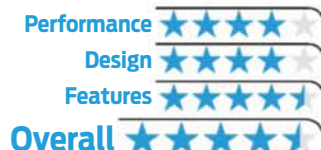
HCC VERDICT



Onkyo TX-NR626

→ £400 Approx → www.onkyo.co.uk
→ Tel: 01628 473350

HIGHS: Powerful, tight sound; impressive specifications including Wi-Fi and network audio clients; simple to use
LOWS: A little brash; faff to use Bluetooth; MHL HDMI pointlessly located on rear panel; cramped remote



HCC VERDICT



Pioneer VSX-923

→ £450 Approx → www.pioneer.co.uk
→ Tel: 01753 789789

HIGHS: Impressive punch and steering; fantastic iControl AV2013 app; AirPlay and HTC Connect
LOWS: Outdated GUI; Wi-Fi and Bluetooth are optional extra modules; inscrutable remote; somewhat artificial sound



HCC VERDICT



Yamaha RX-V675

→ £500 Approx → uk.yamaha.com
→ Tel: 0844 811 1116

HIGHS: Powerful, clean sound; efficient setup; audio streaming quality; smartphone app control
LOWS: Primitive onscreen graphics; cramped remote control; sound possibly a little cold for your tastes



The sale of the century?

With this cheapo streamer you can update any screen to internet TV services. **Steve May** struggles to think of a better way to spend £10



IF YOU'VE BEEN looking for a cost-effective way of adding internet TV, be it catch-up or video-on-demand, to a non-connected telly, then Sky's new £10 Now TV box must seem heaven-sent.

With its double-take price and promise of instant connectivity, even certified technophobes will be hard pushed to think of reasons not to buy one. So what exactly do you get for your meagre tenner? As it happens, quite a lot...

The Now TV box, which is available directly from the Now TV website (the price includes post and packing and an HDMI cable), is a well-made puck of a player. It features Now TV branding on top and sports an HDMI output, plus a 3.5mm minijack AV output for SD screens. The player has onboard Wi-Fi; there's no Ethernet port. The box is actually a clone of the highly regarded Roku LT streamer, which sells for around £50, although it's bundled with the better Roku XS remote control.

You'll need to get a Now TV account to complete the setup process. When you sign up, you get a 30-day free trial for Sky Movies, which then shifts to £8.99 a month for three months, before settling at £15. The movie selection is the same as that offered on Sky's satellite service.

You can also buy Sky Sports day passes for £9.99, which is a good deal if you only really want to watch certain events.

Unsurprisingly, Now TV dominates the home page display, but it's flanked by BBC iPlayer, Demand 5 and news from Sky

and the BBC.

Interestingly, the box also offers access to the Roku Channel Store, which is where you'll find a variety of extra services which can be downloaded and added to your lineup.

The version of the Roku Store here has a smaller inventory than the iteration on native Roku boxes. A notable omission is Netflix, but there's still a goodly number of specialist apps to peruse. Worth investigation are Spotify, Revision 3, which offers a number of high-grade tech shows, Flixster, Vimeo and anime channel Crunchy Roll.

Fast and furious

Image quality from the service is (perhaps surprisingly) very good. Sky doesn't promote the package as HD, but uses adaptive bitrate streaming which adjusts depending on the quality of the broadband available. I put it on a fast Virgin Media broadband connection and was suitably impressed. Marvel's *Avengers Assemble* is a great-looking HD movie, and on the Now TV box a good deal of that detail and sparkle made it though to the screen. Given that the Broadcom processor in the box upscales content to 720p, it's difficult to pinpoint what's coming from where, but by way of comparison the results looked as good as upscaled DVD. The excellent *Dredd* appeared equally impressive. The opening high-speed bike chase was crisp and involving, with the fast action not adding any unwanted artefacts.

The BBC iPlayer implementation, incidentally, includes HD streams, and the results look excellent. Unfortunately, audio across the board is two-channel stereo. Of course, plumbed into an AVR, you can at least find some use for all those DSP audio modes.

Overall, the Now TV box should be considered an absolute steal. Obviously being heavily subsidised by Sky to help promote its Now TV platform, it's a cost-effective way of getting extra content to unconnected flatscreens and provides a real alternative to paid subscription. And if you simply want to put iPlayer on a bedroom TV, it's simply too good a deal to turn down ■

SPECIFICATIONS

CHANNELS: Now TV, BBC iPlayer, Demand 5, BBC News, Sky News, Vimeo, Revision 3 and many more

CONNECTIONS: 1 x HDMI output; 1 x 3.5mm multi-AV

DIMENSIONS: 84(h)x 84(w) x 24(d)mm

WEIGHT: 85g
FEATURES: Integrated 802.11n Wi-Fi; less than 2W power consumption when streaming video; IR remote; bundled with an HDMI cable

AV INFO

PRODUCT:
Internet TV streaming player

POSITION:
The only dedicated Now TV-branded media player

PEERS:
Roku LT;
WD TV Live;
Apple TV

HCC VERDICT

Now TV box

→ £10 Approx → www.nowtv.com

→ Tel: N/A

HIGHS: Astonishingly affordable; well-made; good selection of streaming TV services; great image quality

LOWS: No 5.1 audio from Now TV content; no YouTube or Netflix access

Performance ★★★★★
Design ★★★★★
Features ★★★★★
Overall ★★★★★



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JVC

Stormy debut for Cloud TV

Toshiba's new L7 series Smart TV is surprisingly affordable and a decent picture performer. But **Steve May** isn't as impressed by its Smart talents

TOSHIBA'S NEW 7 Series TVs provide the jumping on point for the brand's 3D-enabled flatscreens. Aggressively priced with contemporary design, the TVs offer Active Shutter rather than Passive 3D, for Full HD stereoscopy. The 40in model reviewed here is the smallest in the line, but it's also available in 50in and 58in guises.

Connectivity is superb. There are four HDMI, Scart, component/composite AV, PC VGA, Ethernet, digital audio out and two USBs with recording to external drive functionality. Wi-Fi is built in, and is supported by Wi-Di, useful if you have a Wi-Di-enabled laptop which you want to mirror on the bigger screen.

Image quality is equally impressive for the price. Toshiba's panel is inherently fast. There's a trio of ClearScan high refresh-rate modes to maximise resolution, but you may not feel compelled to use them. With ClearScan off the set still delivers approximately 900 lines of moving resolution. All three ClearScan modes snap definition up to a full 1080 lines, but only the Standard setting should be entertained as all others impart motion artefacts, seen as smudgy halos around certain moving objects. Using these ClearScan settings also removes horizontal panning judder.

Backlight uniformity is good and contrast high, without crushing shadow detail. When Quaid returns to his apartment in the *Total Recall* remake, the

rain-spattered cityscape boasts scads of futuristic detail. Cobbled stones near the jetty are convincingly textured, while the shadowed buildings retain depth. Colours are a tad subdued – naturalistic even – for LED.

The set's 3D performance suffers

from minor crosstalk double imaging, but is fun enough. The arm on one of the 3D glasses snapped the first time I tried them on, though...

A not-so-nimble nimbus

The 40L7355 introduces Toshiba's new Smart portal, Cloud TV. The selection of streaming content apps is better than on the old Places service – you'll find Netflix, BBC iPlayer, Blinkbox and KnowHow Movies amongst others. There's also a web browser, and Skype calling is possible via an optional webcam. However, usability is poor. The interface, like the main menu, is ponderous to navigate, as if the onboard processor simply can't cope.

The 40L7355 promises DLNA media playback from USB and across a network, but the latter is awful. We tried two samples and both failed to play audio files located on our test NAS, even humble MP3s. Video was more successful, with MKV, AVI and MOV files all playable. From USB, codec compatibility is much better, but the presentation remains nothing to shout about.

In conclusion, this is a decent LED TV capable of a good video performance but hobbled by a slow and ill-conceived Smart portal. Hopefully, Toshiba will improve matters with a firmware update; at the moment the Cloud proposal is looking decidedly overcast ■



SPECIFICATIONS

3D: Yes. Active Shutter
ULTRA HD: No. 1,920 x 1,080

TUNER: Yes. Freeview HD

CONNECTIONS: 4 x HDMI; Scart; component; Ethernet; digital audio output; PC VGA; 2 x USB

SOUND: 2 x 10W

BRIGHTNESS: N/A

CONTRAST RATIO: N/A

DIMENSIONS (OFF STAND): 922(w) x 600(h) x 182(d)mm

WEIGHT (OFF STAND): 12kg

FEATURES: Built-in Wi-Fi; USB multimedia playback; USB HDD recording; DLNA media playback; Resolution+; ClearScan; Wi-Di; Cloud TV Smart Portal with BBC iPlayer, YouTube, Blinkbox, KnowHow Movies, Netflix and more; open web browser; Toshiba remote app; MHL HDMI input

AV INFO

PRODUCT:
Smart 3D TV

POSITION:
Toshiba's entry-level Smart 3D screen

PEERS:
LG 42LA64IV;
Samsung
UE40F6500SB;
Sony
KDL-42W805A

HCC VERDICT

Toshiba 40L7355

→ £700 Approx → www.toshiba.co.uk
→ 0844 856 0730

HIGHS: Crisp HD image quality; good motion resolution; decent audio

LOWS: Sluggish Cloud TV portal; poor network file support; minor crosstalk noise with 3D

Performance ★★★★★

Design ★★★★★

Features ★★★★★

Overall ★★★★★



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Slender surround sound

There are numerous cheap and undistinguished soundbars available. Thankfully, reports **Martin Pipe**, Yamaha's YSP-3300 isn't one of them...



Yamaha's slim bar offers HDMI switching and 'IntelliBeam' auto calibration

HERE'S THE LATEST incarnation of Yamaha's soundbar technology, which promises space-restricted users the benefits of surround sound from a single box that sits on the wall or under your telly. Well, sort of – the £900 YSP-3300 is also accompanied by a wireless subwoofer.

The YSP-3300 may be Far Eastern, but its roots are much in this country. Cambridge company 1 Limited conceived the idea of using multiple drivers, driven by sophisticated digital signal processing, to generate individual 'sound beams'. Some of these (corresponding to the front and centre channels) are aimed directly at the listener, while others (surround) are reflected off the walls. Pioneer was the first to commercialise this 'digital sound projection' technology a decade ago, but at £25,000 a pop it was hardly mass-market.

In place of the Pioneer's 254 'beam drivers', Yamaha employs a more affordable sixteen. Augmenting them are conventional drive units on either side of the YSP-3300's fascia for lower frequencies.

The YSP-3300 will handle hi-def audio from Blu-ray players via four HDMI ports, which jostle for rear-panel space with various audio inputs. An ARC HDMI output hooks up to your TV.

The YSP-3300 may lack a USB port (or, for that matter, a radio tuner) but it's accompanied by a

wireless dongle that plugs into an iPhone/iPod. Not an Apple owner? The dongle also has a USB port. Connect this to your computer system with the supplied USB cable, and it becomes a virtual soundcard.

Getting the YSP-3300 going is a doddle. Place the supplied microphone in the listening position, plug it in, and the soundbar's 'IntelliBeam' auto-calibration gets to work.

On the whole, the YSP-3300 works well. Dialogue never struggles in terms of intelligibility, although the subwoofer adds a degree of plummy to voices – such as when Beech (Morgan Freeman) interrogates Harper (Tom Cruise) in Chapter 9 of *Oblivion*. This movie's bass-heavy soundtrack by French group M83 is, however, done justice – as are the action sequences. In neither instance was strain evident; I was using the YSP-3300 in a smallish (10' x 12') living room of the sort it was intended for.

The surround channels are realistic. The birdsong in *Oblivion's* river retreat convinced me extra speakers were present. Left-to-right separation is comparatively limited, though; here, the centre channel seems to dominate the proceedings. Stereo music listening, meanwhile, was marred by the aforementioned lower-midrange colouration and a soundstaging that verged towards the artificial.

Beaming smile

The YSP-3300 succeeds in its main aim, creating an involving surround field from its array of beam drivers. Yet it's not quite the all-round finished package – sound quality is good, but not great, and at this price some may want smoother wireless music integration ■

SPECIFICATIONS

DRIVE UNITS: 16 x 1.1in 'beam' drivers; 2 x 2.5in midrange drivers

AMPLIFICATION: 37.4W (beams); 124W (midrange)

CONNECTIONS: 4 x HDMI inputs; 1 x HDMI output (ARC support); coaxial digital audio input; 2 x optical digital audio inputs; phono analogue audio input; IR in/out; RS232

DOLBY TRUEHD/DTS-HD MA: Yes/Yes

SEPARATE SUB: Yes. NS-WSW160 active type with 6.25in cone driver, 75W amplifier

REMOTE CONTROL: Yes

DIMENSIONS (SOUNDBAR): 1,002(w) x 86(h) x 161(d)mm

WEIGHT (SOUNDBAR): 6.3kg

FEATURES: Wireless subwoofer; IntelliBeam calibration with three memories; compressed music enhancer; wireless dongle for iPod playback and USB PC connections; multiple 'beam' modes including '5+2' for 7.1 audio; 10 Cinema DSP modes plus Dolby Digital Pro-Logic IIx and DTS-ES decoding; wall-mounting (with optional bracket); TV remote repeater; eco mode; adaptive DRC; UniVolume sound 'leveller'

HCC VERDICT

Yamaha YSP-3300

→ £900 Approx → uk.yamaha.com

→ Tel: 0844 811 1116

HIGHS: Easy to set up; space-saving and convenient; surprising lack of 'sweet-spot'

LOWS: Lacks musical transparency; front-channel separation relatively limited; wireless music integration could be slicker

Performance ★★★★★

Design ★★★★★

Features ★★★★★

Overall ★★★★★

AV INFO

PRODUCT: 'Digital sound projector' – or soundbar, if you prefer

POSITION: One of four in Yamaha's YSP range

PEERS: Sonos PlayBar; Bose Cinemate ISR



Mid-range majesty

Immense black levels, immersive 3D and punchy colours – Panasonic's TX-P42GT60 delivers cinematic thrills at an attainable price point, says **John Archer**

AV INFO

PRODUCT:
42in Smart 3D plasma TV

POSITION:
In the middle of Panasonic's plasma range, below the VT65 series and above the ST60s

PEERS:
Samsung PS51F5500;
Sony KDL-40W905A

WITH ULTRA HD and OLED the current buzzwords in AV, plasma TV technology feels even more besieged than ever before. We love Panasonic's defiant response, though, as it's come out with all guns blazing with its 2013 plasma range.

The question for today, though, is how much of the outstanding quality exhibited by Panasonic's premium ZT65 and VT65 plasma models has filtered down into Panasonic's latest mid-range series, as represented by the 42in TX-P42GT60.

Not the slimmest set around

Well, the TV's design doesn't give much away. It's attractive enough with its glossy black frame and glinting metallic trim, but the width of the frame is enough in these skinny-obsessed times to stop it from looking particularly cutting-edge.

Its connections, too, aren't beyond reproach. Panasonic only provides three HDMI

rather than the four I'm increasingly coming to expect. It does, however, tick the key multimedia boxes courtesy of built-in Wi-Fi, three USBs and even an SD card slot.

Where things really look up, however, is with the TX-P42GT60's plasma panel specification. This mid-range set sports the same 'NeoPlasma Black 3000' design employed by Panasonic's 2013 hero models, meaning you get the same 3000Hz Focussed Field Drive technology for improving motion response and brightness/vibrancy, as well as Panasonic's Infinite Black Pro and High Contrast Filter technology. Furthermore, the TX-P42GT60's mid-range status hasn't prevented it from still carrying the endorsement of both THX and the Imaging Science Foundation.

As you'd expect from these endorsements, the TX-P42GT60 is stuffed with calibration tools and aids focused on optimising movie playback, including extensive colour, white



The TX-P42GT60 ships with a standard, fuss-free handset

balance and gamma management systems. Tweakers will be happy.

The Smart box is ticked by the inclusion of Panasonic's new, very friendly My Home Screen interface, complete with the option to establish multiple personalised hubs of your own, providing access to only the apps and sources you or other family members most use.

The TX-P42GT60 also lets you stream video, photo and music files from DLNA-ready networked computers, and access online content carried by Panasonic's Viera Connect platform. This, again, is well-presented, but it lacks some of the key video-on-demand

'If you love films, you'll love this screen – the picture quality is exceptional for the price point'

platforms. LoveFilm, ITV Player, 4OD and Demand 5 are particularly unfortunate absentees. In pure content terms, Korean brands Samsung and LG are leading the Smart way.

Like father, like son

Film fanatics, though, will probably readily forgive the current lack of video streaming platforms once they lay eyes on the TX-P42GT60's pictures. It's immediately apparent that this well-priced TV does indeed retain a startling amount of the outstanding picture quality sported by Panasonic's higher-end PDPs.

The gorgeous race scenes in colourful cartoon *Wreck-It Ralph*, for instance, reveal far greater levels of brightness and colour dynamism than I've seen on previous mid-range plasmas. As well as making pictures more eye-catching, this extra picture punch also makes the set much more usable in a brightly-lit environment.

It's great to find, too, that unlike previous Panasonic step-down screens, the intensity and contrast of the TX-P42GT60's pictures are not seriously reduced by high ambient light levels.

These new strengths join forces deliciously with Panasonic's traditional plasma contrast strength. This includes a black level response that's nothing short of spectacular, rendering *The Dark Knight's* night-time chase across Gotham with a bazooka-wielding Joker with a degree of credibility and purity that's unparalleled for the set's price level, and leagues ahead of anything LED-based LCD models can achieve.

What's more, because the TX-P42GT60 produces its immense black level response

natively, tucked away within even the darkest corners are excellent levels of shadow detail that help dark scenes avoid a flat, hollow look. Just make sure you don't leave the set's brightness set too high, though, or dark areas can suffer with green speckling noise.

The TX-P42GT60's ability to produce an intense, authentic black colour pays great dividends with the rest of its colour palette, providing a superb foundation for other colours to play off against, enhancing the naturalism of the whole palette.

Motion is a touch problematic on the TX-P42GT60 if you ignore the provided Intelligent Frame Creation (IFC) processing, suffering gentle judder and fizzing dot noise over moving skin tones. Happily, though, Panasonic's Hexa processing lets you use the IFC processing – at least on its lowest level setting – to reduce judder and remove dot noise with minimal unwanted side effects.

Plasma's fast-response technology also means motion is pretty much completely clear of the blur still common with LCD screens, helping the Panasonic produce the intense detailing and textures of ultra-sharp Blu-ray sequences, like those in the woodland retreat in *Oblivion*.

Superior stereoscopy

The TX-P42GT60's extra brightness versus last year's plasmas makes it a more formidable 3D performer, too. 3D pictures look much more dynamic than they have on earlier Panasonic 3D plasmas, drawing you into the experience and ensuring that watching 3D feels less of a compromise.

You can also make out more detail in the TX-P42GT60's brighter stereoscopic world, which in turn helps the image delineate a more expansive, accurate sense of depth and space. And since the TX-P42GT60 uses active 3D technology you see a genuine Full HD 3D picture – and once that is scarcely blighted by crosstalk ghosting noise.

There is a little judder in evidence with 3D, but overall the TX-P42GT60 is equally as accomplished with stereoscopic material as it is with 2D – especially when it comes to doing the extreme contrast ratios of films justice.

The TX-P42GT60's audio is less exceptional than its pictures, sounding boxed in and muddy when the going gets tough. But this muddiness doesn't slide into full-on distortion, and there's a respectable amount of bass underpinning the soundstage.

Overall, if you love films, you'll love the TX-P42GT60. The picture quality is exceptional for its mid-range price point, providing a poignant reminder – with 4K waiting in the wings – that mere resolution isn't all you need for gorgeous TV pictures. The Panasonic may not be the Smartest set around, nor the most stylish, but it performs where it counts ■

ON THE MENU



→ There are plenty of apps available from Panasonic's Viera Market, but some of the main catchup and VOD players are MIA. Beyond the Smart portal, the TX-P42GT60 offers extensive calibration options in a straightforward menu system

SPECIFICATIONS

3D: Yes. Active
ULTRA HD: No. 1,920 x 1,080
TUNER: Yes. Freeview HD and Freesat HD
CONNECTIONS: 3 x HDMI inputs; 3 x USB; SD card input; Ethernet; Scart; headphone jack; optical digital audio output; CI port; component video input
SOUND: 20W
BRIGHTNESS: N/A
CONTRAST RATIO: N/A
DIMENSIONS (OFF STAND): 994(w) x 596(h) x 49(d)mm
WEIGHT (OFF STAND): 17.5kg
FEATURES: Built-in Wi-Fi; My Home Screen interface with personalisation options; ISF certification; THX certification; colour management; white balance management; gamma controls; Hexa video processing; Intelligent Frame Creation processing; noise reduction; multimedia playback via USB, SD or DLNA device; two pairs of 3D glasses included

HCC VERDICT



Panasonic TX-P42GT60

→ £1,150 Approx → www.panasonic.co.uk
 → Tel: 0844 844 3899

HIGHS: Stellar, film-friendly 2D and 3D picture quality; excellent Smart TV interface; decent value

LOWS: Minor motion issues; slightly bland design; not enough video streaming services currently available

Performance ★★★★★

Design ★★★★★

Features ★★★★★

Overall ★★★★★

Frugal Freesat HD finds friends

This budget HD receiver can't be faulted for the price, concedes **Steve May**



AT JUST £50, the Manhattan Plaza HD-S2 is the cheapest HD Freesat receiver you can buy. For those looking to turn away from Sky it'll put your dish to good use, delivering a wide portfolio of free-to-air channels, including HD services from the BBC, ITV, C4, NHK and RT.

The single-tuner box itself is small, at just 210mm wide, and sports an LNB input, HDMI, Ethernet, USB (for software updates), optical digital audio output (for stereo or Dolby Digital 5.1) and legacy Scart. It comes with a simple but effective finger remote control.

Setup is a snap. Screw on your F-connector and follow the prompts. The process takes a few minutes. Like all Freesat STBs, you'll need to enter your postcode so that the box can deliver the correct regional channel variations. The menu interface is crisp and unfussy.

The Plaza HD-S2 delivers the classic Freesat platform, rather than the newer Freetime service. Hit Guide and you get the standard full-screen channel genre categories. Curiously, Freesat doesn't provide a sub-section for its HD offers, and the channel guide

The most affordable Freesat HD receiver around

doesn't encourage you to view HD versions of programmes when available. The only way to avoid having to slog through the 8-day EPG for hi-def is to assign HD channels as Favourites.

Picture quality is excellent. 1080i images are crisp and artefact free. Once your box is online, you can access both BBC iPlayer and ITV Player, too.

Overall, this cheapo receiver is a great way of watching satellite telly without subscription. It's not exactly glamorous, but it is excellent value for money.

HCC VERDICT

Manhattan Plaza HD-S2 → £50

Overall ★★★★★

ORBITSOUND SB60 AIRSOUND BASE → Approx £300

Covering all bases

Adrian Justins plonks his telly on top of this pedestal soundbar and enjoys the results

THE LATEST PRODUCT from soundbar specialist Orbitsound is the SB60, which slots in between tabletop and TV stand thanks to its 60cm x 30cm footprint. The brand says every screen up to 42in on the market will fit on it.

It's a solid piece of kit, fashioned from 20 individual wooden sections designed to minimise distortion. It has twin sealed 2in front speakers, a 5in down-firing subwoofer and two side-firing sealed 2in drivers. It looks cooler than James Dean in its gloss-black overcoat and comes with interchangeable black and silver grilles.

Socketry comprises just optical digital, stereo phonos and a 3.5mm line-in. There is no HDMI, no coax and no wireless connection, and the optical input accepts PCM signals in the absence of Dolby and DTS decoders. There's no display window, either – just a single LED behind the grille that glows blue with excessive brightness when switched on, and flashes as you change the volume.

Audio from its 200W amplifier is highly impressive in terms of power, clarity and dispersion. Volume isn't the loudest but distortion is absent. *Rise of the Guardians* on

Blu-ray proves terrifically involving with strong dialogue, an engaging score and nicely detailed effects. With *Avatar*, the creaking branches and screams of the Na'vi are all too moving during the attack on the big tree and with Michael Jackson's *This Is It* the soundtrack enthusiastically fills the room. Pleasingly, there's very little need to tweak bass and treble when changing sources and the SB60 doesn't prove tiring even after long listening sessions. Easily Orbitsound's best-sounding product yet – and perhaps proof that soundbars designed as TV pedestals (and hence with larger cabinets) are the way to go.



Swap between a black or silver grille to match your TV

HCC VERDICT

Orbitsound SB60 airSOUND Base → £300

Overall ★★★★★

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WT50 Designer Full HD 3D LED LCD TV

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TX-L42WT50B 42"	£1149



FREE
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with 55"
TV

DT50/ET50 Full HD 3D LED LCD TV

TX-L55DT50B 55"	£1499
TX-L47DT50B 47"	£1049
TX-L42DT50B 42"	£899
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100% guaranteed! **Mark Craven's** immersive, groundbreaking and one-of-a-kind discussion of the wonders of AV marketing will change your life forever!

WHEN I WAS very little, my father told me that if I had the TV and the hi-fi on at the same time, they would blow up. A cunning ruse to stop me wasting electricity and save the rest of the family's ears from the twin delights of my Shakin' Stevens LP and *Scooby Doo* on the telly, he said it with enough conviction and seriousness that, for a while, I actually believed him.

He was, of course, talking utter nonsense, which, incidentally, is what both Samsung and LG are doing at the moment when it comes to promoting their curved OLED displays. For companies that are keen rivals, I'm surprised that the marketing hype for their slim-line, concave TVs has been remarkably similar. Not only are we told that these futuristic televisions offer ultra-high contrast ratios (which is undoubtedly true), we're also informed that buying one will be like 'bringing home an IMAX theatre that you can enjoy every day' (Samsung), or will provide an 'IMAX-like' viewing experience (LG).

This is all great publicity for the likes of the BFI IMAX (pictured), but rather condescending towards the TV-hungry public, which, I assume, Samsung and LG thinks of as completely stupid.

Not much of a contest

I've scratched my head and I really can't think of any way in which watching a movie on a 55in OLED screen is akin to visiting an IMAX cinema. As we discussed in a recent issue of *HCC*, the IMAX speaker system will peak at 118dB and drop down to 20Hz, which I'm sure is beyond the power of the super-thin drivers housed in both Samsung and LG's skinny bezels. Furthermore, an IMAX screen is measured in metres, not inches, and is capable of displaying an image that will fill your field of vision. Which a curved OLED screen simply won't do, unless

you sit with your face pretty much pressed against the panel.

The only similarity between Samsung's S9C and LG's 55EA980W is that it's curved. A bit. This is also true of IMAX screens, and, let's not forget, some other regular home cinema projection screens, partly to ensure the image thrown from the projector maintains its correct proportions.

There really is no reason for a curved OLED TV – at the current size, anyway – except that it looks cool. Very cool in fact.

So cool, that I would consider buying one just to annoy my friends. Yet the marketeers appear loathe to go down that route, and have instead tried to make it something that it actually isn't. Anyone buying one of these TVs hoping for an extravagantly 'immersive' experience is going to be disappointed. Especially if they are sitting slightly off-axis.

I appreciate that moaning about marketing is akin to shooting fish in a barrel. We've all seen car adverts where there isn't another vehicle on the road, posters for hamburgers that appear twice as big and juicy as they do in real life, and commercials for shampoos that promise to not only wash your hair, but bring it back from the dead. And in the AV world, we've been offered soundbars that deliver surround sound audio from just two drivers, and 3DTVs that, if the ads are to be believed, can unleash a life-size shark into your living room.

But while I understand that promoting a product requires a little bit of imagination – no one will ever launch an average-spec TV with the slogan 'It's an average-spec TV!', wouldn't it be good if consumers were assumed to have a modicum of intelligence? ■

*Have you seen any bad examples of AV marketing?
Let us know: email letters@homecinemachoice.com*

Mark Craven attributes his lack of hair to the fact that his shampoo doesn't include any neo-elastic-revitalisation formula, or pro-vita serum 12





FILM FANATIC

With the heady days of Summer now a thing of the past, **Anton van Beek** weighs in on this year's crop of mega-budget Hollywood blockbusters...

SO THAT'S ANOTHER UK Summer over with, and wasn't it fun? England beat Australia in the Ashes, a Royal birth united the nation in its disdain for saturation news coverage, Jeremy Paxman grew a beard and the weather was absolutely glorious for the most part. All in all, this Summer was a bit of a belter. Unless you ventured down to your local cinema, that is.

I'd argue that 2013 has hardly given us what you could call a vintage Summer for Hollywood blockbusters. And here's why.

Disney's *The Lone Ranger* (pictured) turned out to be every bit as tiresome as all of the production woes and rewrites had led us to expect, Bruce Willis continued to undo all of the good will he'd amassed over the years with the excitement-free *RED 2*, and the curse of M. Night Shyamalan continued apace, negating Will Smith's star power in the forgettable *After Earth* (a situation not helped by the casting of Smith's charisma-free son Jaden as the film's lead). I could also mention *The Hangover Part III* here, but given how bad *Part II* was, I really doubt anybody expected much from that comedy sequel.

Even the trio of action blockbusters that Team HCC was looking forward to most of all didn't really deliver quite as I'd expected: *Elysium* failed to live up to the promise of Neill Blomkamp's sublime *District 9*; Guillermo Del Toro's *Pacific Rim* served up plenty of stonking giant-robot-on-giant-monster action, but struggled whenever its attention shifted to its human cast; and while Zack Snyder's *Man of Steel* delivered exactly the kind of epic superhero action that self-respecting home cinema buffs crave (not to mention a phenomenally impactful soundtrack that is going to kick ass on Blu-ray) it was just as po-faced and glum as Christopher Nolan's *Dark Knight* movies.

Now, before anybody starts thinking that this column is going to be all doom and gloom, it's worth noting that there were a few mega-budget treats to be found. *Monsters University* and *Despicable Me 2* proved yet again that animation is still the home of some of the best writing in Hollywood; *The Wolverine* dragged the comic character back from the doldrums of his last solo outing; and *Fast & Furious 6* deservedly raced into pole position at the box office by being even more over-the-top than its predecessor, and every bit as much fun.

As for *Iron Man 3*, *Oblivion* and *Star Trek Into Darkness*, you can find out my thoughts on those films in the Playback section of this very issue.

Hidden gems

Cinema isn't always about the tentpole titles, of course. Movie-goers who were prepared to venture away from the much-advertised blockbusters and try something a little more left-field were rewarded by films such as Steven Soderbergh's Liberace biopic *Behind the Candelabra*, Joss Whedon's take on *Much Ado About Nothing*, Richard Linklater's *Before Midnight*, Studio Ghibli's *From Up on Poppy Hill* and the killer whale documentary *Blackfish* – all these conspired to deliver the laughs, thrills and drama that many of their mega-budget contemporaries were missing.

Of course, these aren't exactly the kind of movies that home cinema fans get excited about, but I'm sure Liberace's outrageous costumes are going to look absolutely dazzling on Blu-ray. In the meantime I'm giving Hollywood's major 2013 titles a six-out-of-ten. Must try harder! ■

Were you disappointed by this Summer's blockbuster movies? Let us know: email letters@homecinemachoice.com

Orchestra aficionado **Anton van Beek** was mostly disappointed by the lack of John Williams' original score in the new Superman movie



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Feedback

Got an axe to grind? Need to comment on current technology?
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Neighbour from heaven

You asked me if any of my neighbours ever complained about the sound from my home cinema system [*HCC's* online poll], and I have to answer both 'Yes' and 'No'. 'No' because they never complained to me about the high volume late at night when enjoying my Bowers & Wilkins DM603 S series speakers in my 5.1 setup. 'Yes', because my apartment next to their house is on the ground floor, so next to their garage, but the guy in the apartment on the second floor lives next to their bedrooms and he gets complaints (like banging on the wall) when I'm watching a movie at night. Luckily, this guy is okay with it!

Patrick, Belgium

Richard Stevenson replies:

Ha! Well, as long as your upstairs neighbour doesn't mind getting all the abuse, I'd suggest you carry on as you are!

Is my Domino's number up?

Hi, I want your opinion on replacing my old but loved SIM2 Domino D35 HD Ready projector with a bargain-priced Epson EH-TW9000W – from reviews I find it really hard to gauge if upgrading from old to new will bring big returns in performance?

My SIM2 was a great performer but recently started to drop out the picture on HDMI when sync'd with an Onkyo receiver. No matter how good the picture was these random drop outs drove me up the wall! The price of the Epson



With no 3D or Full HD support, SIM2's Domino D35 is getting a little old

(less than half the original RRP) is tempting me and I'm hoping to experience the same amazement I had when going from an InFocus to the SIM2. Is there a way reviews could indicate that a current product

outperforms a legacy product to give an idea?

On another note I see an awful lot of installs using the Kaleidescape system, and wanted to report that my SageTV system offers almost all the benefits at

★ STAR LETTER...

Which AV receiver is right for me?

I have just retired at the age of 66 and would like to treat myself to a home cinema. I start conversion on my garage in eight days time and I have approx £15,000 to spend on equipment – I am an avid reader of your magazine and I am trying to learn as much as I can but I am stuck on what AV receiver to buy. This is my proposed setup at the moment: Grandview Cyber Series 8' Electric tab-tensioned screen; KEF R700 5.1 speaker system; Audiolab 8200 CD player; Sony BDP-S790 Blu-ray player; JVC X55 projector; AV receiver = ?

Although I like cinema I do like to listen to music so this is also a consideration. Some advice would be appreciated!
Keith, via email

Mark Craven replies:
Congratulations Keith: a dedicated cinema room sounds like the perfect way to kick-off

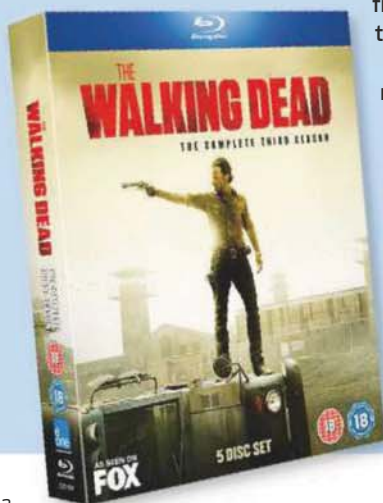
your retirement! The most important consideration for buying an AV receiver is how it will sound with your speakers. Beyond that, it's whether it has all the necessary inputs and any bells and whistles you might want. With your proposed system, you could feasibly get by with a five-channel amp with only one HDMI input and one output – not that you'll find many of them these days...

I'm not sure how much of your £15,000 is left for the AV receiver, but if there's still £4,000 spare you can't do much wrong with Arcam's AVR750, which is a 7.1 heavyweight with authoritative power and a refined yet energetic performance. Yet

a more likely option considering your budget would be something at more than half the price. KEF chose a Pioneer SC-LX86 to partner its R Series speakers at the Bristol Sound and Vision Show earlier this year, and this is now available for as little as £1,300 – it's a great-sounding AVR, although the MCACC EQ program can need a bit of after-care. You say you like listening to music, too, so an alternative would be one of Yamaha's high-end Aventure models, which we've found to have a musical bent. Speak to the dealer selling you the KEF speakers about setting up a few demo sessions.

Oh, and let us know how the cinema build goes!

Star letter-writer Keith wins a copy of *The Walking Dead: The Complete Third Season* on Blu-ray courtesy of our pals at EntertainmentOne. This latest outing for the hit zombie-filled TV series is available to own on DVD and Blu-ray from September 30.



a fraction of the cost: centralised PVR, movie library, music library and thin client extender.

Stuart Gare, via email

Mark Craven replies: We reviewed the SIM2 Domino way back in 2007, when it was best-in-class. However, in modern terms it's a bit underspecified – not Full HD, nor 3D capable.

Epson's EH-TW9000W is, comparatively, not as high-end as the SIM2 was when it launched, but does allow for Full HD and 3D Blu-ray viewing – and its wireless HDMI transmission system could be a help depending on the circumstances of your install. These reasons alone should be enough to upgrade (although the Epson PJ isn't immune from crosstalk with 3D material), especially if you think the SIM2 has become faulty – the HDMI dropout issue could be caused by your Onkyo AVR, of course. As always, the best thing to do is to get a demo, although this may be difficult with the Epson model if you're buying it second-hand.

As for comparing current products to legacy products – it's very hard to do as we don't know what products people would consider comparable, nor do we have them to hand! We do try to flag up, whenever possible, what existing hardware a new model is competing against.

Lastly, you're not alone in telling us that there are cheaper alternatives to Kaleidescape – there are also cheaper alternatives to a Ferrari, but we'd still like to drive one...

Panasonic decision

I'm looking to replace my old Sony Blu-ray player (the disc tray mechanism appears to be dying)

CONTACT US...

Write to HCC, AV Tech Media Ltd, Hadlow House, 9 High Street, Green Street Green, Orpington, BR6 6BG, or email us at letters@homecinemachoice.com

Please note: we cannot guarantee to print/answer all the letters we receive. Sorry.



Game of Thrones on Blu-ray offers great DTS-HD MA mixes

and am wondering which of the two Panasonic machines – the DMP-BDT500 or the DMP-BDT330 – I should opt for. I've narrowed it down to these two because I can't afford anything more 'high-end', and I've read good things about their build quality. As I understand it the DMP-BDT500 is older, but still part of Panasonic's lineup – how does the DMP-BDT330 improve on it?

Peter Whitmore, via email

Mark Craven replies: This is a situation we imagine many people are faced with this year, as both Panasonic and Sony have, unusually, introduced new Blu-ray players but retained the top-level model from last year. Of the 2013 Panasonic decks, the DMP-BDT330 is the best-specified, but is still out-specced by the 2012-era DMP-BDT500.

Essentially, the latter is a player designed for music lovers. Yes, it will handle 2D and 3D Blu-rays, stream media over a network and access the Viera Connect Smart platform (just like the DMP-BDT330, in fact), but the brand's engineers really put a lot of focus on its audio chops, arming it with 192kHz/32-bit Burr Brown DACs and a multitude of processing modes including 'Re-master'

options (Jazz, Classical, etc) and the Tube Sound mode that injects a bit of old-school warmth into proceedings.

If you don't plan on using your Blu-ray player to play music, then you might want to save the £60 difference and get the DMP-BDT330. This has a slimmer design, but still offers twin HDMI outputs (there are no analogue audio outs at all, though). It also comes with a regular remote control, rather than the infuriating touchpad bundled with its older brother. And if you don't need the second HDMI jack of the DMP-BDT330 or its 4K upscaling, you can save even more money by getting the DMP-BDT2320.

I watch TV on my TV

Richard Stevenson says (*Point of View*, HCC #224) that TV programmes are getting better – budgets, actors, etc – but I can't

see them replacing movies on my projector setup.

In the past few years I've watched a massive amount of TV (including all of *Lost*, *Breaking Bad*, *Homeland* and *Game of Thrones*) but I always watch it on my TV – even when I have bought the shows on Blu-ray or DVD. My home cinema room (which is in the loft) is used for movies and gaming.

Why is this? To be honest I'm not really sure – for some reason I think I'll always think of TV programmes as a perfect fit for my TV screen, not my projector. For me, movies will always be number one!

Farhan, via email

Anton van Beek replies: Really? Then you're missing out. *Game of Thrones* on Blu-ray has a

Panasonic's DMP-BDT330 is a solid budget BD-spinner



brilliant DTS-HD soundmix that deserves to be heard on a cinema setup – as do other shows such as *Pacific* and even *Breaking Bad*. Get upstairs now.

What's wrong with my Oppo?

Hi. I recently imported an Oppo BDP-93 from Amazon here in the UK. I wanted the multizone function (which works like a dream), and although I am blown away by the picture and sound quality, there is one small thing which spoils an otherwise outstanding player. I am getting video judder on any motion that moves either left to right or up and down. I have tried various settings but nothing gets rid of this problem, I have even tried different HDMI leads, still no good. Could it be my plasma TV, which is an LG model and about five years old?

Paul Kelly, Plymouth

Martin Pipe replies: Yes, your Oppo – and its bigger brother, the BDP-95 – are superb Blu-ray



Oppo's BDP-93: now replaced by the BDP-103, but still a decent deck

players that should give excellent results with high-quality displays. You don't reveal which LG plasma TV you're using, but models of the five-year vintage you mention could easily yield a certain amount of minor judder with 24p video from Blu-ray. However, it should not be as bad as you're seeing – unless you're particularly sensitive to the effect. Do you recall any judder with any previous Blu-ray player? If you can borrow another player from a friend, configure it for 24p in the video

settings menu and see if the fault persists with a known disc. Check first of all, though, whether your BDP-93 is itself properly configured for 24p output. If it's not, it may convert 24p (how Blu-ray stores film-derived material) into 50/60Hz video with interlaced or progressive scanning – things are particularly bad if it has been converted to a 60Hz format, as used in the US and Japan. Go to the 'Video Setup' menu and, first of all, check that 'TV System' is set to 'Multi-system' – and not the default NTSC (which will

also give you motion artifacts when playing PAL DVDs). While you're at it, ensure that the 'primary output' is set to the specific HDMI port (1 or 2) that feeds your TV. Next, scroll down until you see the eighth '1080p24' option. This should be set to 'auto'; the default mode is 'off'. It may also be worth disengaging any proprietary video processing modes on your TV; these can create problems. Also, check that your BDP-93 is up to date. The latest firmware can be downloaded from www.oppodigital.com.

Win! Three great Blu-rays up for grabs

Just email your answer to Competitions@homecinemachoice.com to be in with a chance



Lifeforce

Sexy space vampires will be invading a home cinema near you when Arrow Video unleashes Tobe Hooper's cult horror classic *Lifeforce* on Blu-ray on September 30. To celebrate we have three limited edition Blu-ray steelbooks of the film to give away.

Question:

Tobe Hooper directed which tool-themed horror classic?

Answer:

- A)** *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre*
B) *The Driller Killer* **C)** *Saw*

Email your answer with '**Lifeforce**' as the subject heading – and include your postal address!



Treme: The Complete Third Season

Get ready for another journey through post-Katrina New Orleans when *Treme: The Complete Third Season* hits DVD and Blu-ray on September 30. And, thanks to our friends at HBO Home Entertainment, we have three copies of the Blu-ray up for grabs.

Question:

Treme producer David Simon also created which celebrated US crime series?

Answer:

- A)** *Hill Street Blues* **B)** *The Wire*
C) *C.S.I.: Crime Scene Investigation*

Email your answer with '**Treme**' as the subject heading – and include your postal address!



The Iceman

Michael Shannon stars in this acclaimed film based on the true story of mob hit man Richard 'The Iceman' Kuklinski. *The Iceman* is out on Blu-ray and DVD from September 30, courtesy of Lions Gate Home Entertainment, and we have five copies of the Blu-ray to give away.

Question:

Michael Shannon played which character in this Summer's *Man of Steel*?

Answer:

- A)** General Zod **B)** Perry White
C) Jor-El

Email your answer with '**Iceman**' as the subject heading – and include your postal address!

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Certified: AV-Holic!



AV-Holic **Tony Oxtoby** has two surround sound setups – now that's a proper home cinema choice...

Introduce yourself...

I'm Tony Oxtoby, 57. I'm an ICT Network Manager, with a very understanding wife. I've always had a love of cinema, from watching black-and-white movies with my mother to today's action blockbusters, so when the children finally left home three years ago, I felt the time was right to build a home cinema of my own.

What kit is in your setup?

I selected the AV equipment following extensive research at the time and chose a Beamax A-Velvet fixed-frame screen and Sony VPL-HW10 projector. The player and amp are from Sony, too – a BDP-S5000ES and STR-DA5400ES. The latter feeds the KEF

KHT3005 7.1 array. Extras include an Atacama Equinox equipment rack, Atlas cables and Lindy mains conditioner. This, I felt, was the best I could afford at the time.

Your projector installation looks rather innovative...

I knew the best way to get a true home cinema experience was a projector setup, but the room (which is at the top of the house and can be made completely dark) threw up a challenge right from the start – the best location for the screen and projector meant fitting the screen on a sloping wall!

I was going to make a pelmet or frame but I wasn't happy with either idea. The solution came to me when looking at a display in a

shop window where they had large boards suspended on cables. I adapted the idea to suspend the Beamax screen. It worked perfectly with no modification; I just used the screws that were used to assemble the screen and fixed the cables to it. This gave the room and the screen a unique look that has worked really well.

What other problems did you overcome when fitting out the cinema room?

I spent a long time looking for the right type of seating. I initially tried beanbag-style chairs but they were not as comfortable as I thought they would have been. Eventually I found a company, Evertaut Ltd from Blackburn, which manufactures cinema seating and seemed perfect. I decided on a bank of three chairs in black leather with matching footstools – which could also be used when my grandchildren watched a movie with me. I installed the main seating on a floating plinth to allow correct

A newer system resides in our AV-Holic's living room, again using KEF KHT3005 speakers

Bottom left: Three dedicated chairs for adults; footstools for the grandchildren

Bottom middle: The cinema room uses a Sony VPL-HW10 PJ – but Tony has his eye on a 4K replacement

Bottom right: Panasonic's new DMP-BDT300 handles disc duties in the lounge



positioning as recommended by Dolby. I added carpeting to deaden reflective areas on the floor and bass traps to aid sound conditioning in the corners of the room. I added some artwork that's also used as sound treatment (they match the cube stools). The lighting is on a remote dimmable control.

The seating position and the sound settings seem perfect for an immersive 7.1 experience.

You've got another setup, too...

Yes, once I'd finished the cinema room I turned my attention to the living room. I researched all of the latest technology within my price range – I enjoy doing the research as much as I do installing the equipment! I finally selected a Panasonic plasma TV as the hub of the system; I feel plasma still gives the best image. The AVR here is a Pioneer VSX-S500; the BD player is a Panasonic DMP-BDT330. Speakers are, again, from KEF – here in a 6.1 array.

What's your favourite bit of kit?

The KEF KHT3005 speaker system. I have used this in both the cinema room and the living room. It has a hard-to-beat aesthetic quality, an awesome-looking subwoofer and terrific sound qualities. I am equally delighted with my Norstone Galby TV stand, and the Panasonic TX-P50GT60B TV is simply awesome.

What do your friends and family think of your cinema obsession?

All have been greatly impressed by both rooms, even Heather (my wife) and she is known to be hard to please! One of my friends who visited the cinema room said that if he had the same setup at home, he would never leave. Both rooms have been finished with my usual pernickety finish (according to the wife!). All cables are hidden where possible, everything is labelled, all electrical joints and banana plugs have had shrink tubing applied.

What's your favourite Blu-ray disc?

It's hard to choose my favourite, but when pushed, I have narrowed it down to seven. *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, *The Wizard of Oz*, *It's a Wonderful Life*, *Forbidden Planet*, *Star Wars*, *Toy Story* and *The Lion, The Witch and the Wardrobe*. These films include some milestones in movie-making and have become family favourites. If I want to show off my system, however, *The Dark Knight Rises* or *Avengers Assemble* are sure to excite. In the living room, *Life of Pi* shows off the picture quality in both 2D and 3D, and *Tron: Legacy* is fantastic.

I am about to revisit the complete *Harry Potter* series, which, believe it or not, my wife has never seen. We will watch this in the living

room so we can see how it compares to the upstairs cinema.

How much have you spent on your setups?

Approximately £15,000 on both, including all the room changes, but the enjoyment I and my family and friends have had from this is immeasurable.

Lastly: are you excited by 4K?

My cinema room is ready to be made 4K as I believe this will be the next big thing. I feel that 3D is still a novelty but for occasional special viewing it does offer a unique experience – *Wreck-It Ralph* was great fun.

Obviously I shall do the same research before choosing the equipment but I am very excited by the 4K equipment that Sony is developing. It would still be a projector (the Sony 4K looks amazing) and a screen to provide that true cinema feel, so they are the next items on my wish list ■

BE IN HCC!

EMAIL US: If you want to share your home cinema setup with other readers, email a selection of hi-res pictures (including one of yourself) to letters@homecinemachoice.com with the subject heading 'AV-Holic' – and please include a contact telephone number.

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PLAYBACK

→ **SOFTWARE HIGHLIGHTS** **IRON MAN 3** Things get personal for Tony Stark in the latest Marvel blockbuster **DEAD MAN DOWN** Colin Farrell is out for revenge **OBLIVION** Tom Cruise's sci-fi epic is tailor-made for Blu-ray **MAD MAX COLLECTION** Hi-def triple-pack hits the skids **TIME BANDITS** Gilliam's cult classic restored **THE JUNGLE BOOK** The king of the Blu-ray swingers **AND MUCH MORE!**

To boldly go...

Star Trek Into Darkness → Paramount → All-region BD

Get ready for the return of a fan-favourite villain and lashings of lens flare in this blockbuster *Star Trek* sequel. Turn to p96 to see if it can top it's predecessor as one of the best BD demo discs around

HCC RATINGS KEY...

Outstanding	★★★★★
Above average	★★★★☆
Acceptable	★★★☆☆
Disappointing	★★☆☆☆
Dire	★☆☆☆☆

Tony always hated having to share the sofa whenever *Robot Wars* was on



DISC
OF THE
MONTH



Black puts the snark in Stark

A welcome injection of humour ensures that Marvel's tin soldier is saved from the scrap heap

→ IRON MAN 3

Phase One of Marvel Studios' interconnected movie universe spent so much of its time laying the groundwork for *Avengers Assembled* that we simply didn't know what to expect from Phase Two. If *Iron Man 3* is any indication, the films released under that banner will be more focused and confident than any of their predecessors.

Wracked with self-doubt in the aftermath of *Avengers Assembled*, Tony Stark (Robert Downey Jr.) finds himself stripped of his home and high-tech gizmos as he becomes the latest target of The Mandarin (Ben Kingsley), an international terrorist determined to bring the United States to its knees.

All of which sounds like fairly standard superhero fare. But director Shane Black reshapes the material into his own vision, giving us a sharp and witty film that feels as much like a sequel to his earlier detective pastiche *Kiss Kiss Bang Bang* as it does to *Iron Man* and its sequel. How else do you explain jokes about Croydon or *Downton Abbey* in a mainstream action blockbuster?

But even if it's not exactly your traditional superhero blockbuster, that's okay. Because *Iron Man 3* towers above them all as the smartest and funniest by some considerable margin.

Picture: For the most part *Iron Man 3* looks very, very strong in hi-def. Daylight scenes are particularly impressive, bright and detailed, while also helping to bring out the bright, metallic colours of the Iron Man and Iron Patriot armours. The only slight niggle is that some of the darker scenes towards the end of the film do suffer from noticeable crush, which robs the AVC 2.40:1 1080p image of a little bit of the sharpness and clarity seen elsewhere.

Audio: As good as *Iron Man 3* looks on Blu-ray, it sounds even better. Sequences such as the missile attack on Stark's home (Chapter 7) get the very best out of the film's DTS-HD MA 7.1 mix, surrounding you with the sound of crumbling masonry and unleashing pounding low-end effects through your subwoofer.

But even the quieter scenes still impress with their detailing and use of the entire soundstage to bring the locations to life.

Extras: *Iron Man 3* serves up some welcome extras including a lively audio commentary, the latest *Marvel One-Shot* short film, (featuring *Captain America's* Agent Carter), ten deleted/extended scenes and two *Making of...* featurettes.

Less impressive is the *Thor: The Dark World* preview – basically the trailer with a few talking heads cut into it.



HCC VERDICT

Iron Man 3

→ Walt Disney Home Entertainment

→ All-region BD → £25 Approx

WE SAY: A spectacularly smart and witty comic book movie that looks and sounds the part in high-definition

Movie ★★★★★

Picture ★★★★★

Audio ★★★★★

Extras ★★★★★

Overall ★★★★★



Mud

EntertainmentOne → Region B BD
£23 Approx



The surprising career rehabilitation of Matthew McConaughey continues with this superb coming-of-age

movie about two teenage boys who befriend an outlaw (McConaughey's Mud) on the Mississippi delta. While this Blu-ray release is a little lacking in in-depth extras – nine cast and crew interviews are your lot – it goes some way to making up for this with its exquisite AV performance. The AVC 2.40:1 1080p encode perfectly recreates the epic sweep of the film's widescreen visuals and is accompanied by a deliciously atmospheric DTS-HD Master Audio 5.1 soundtrack.



Scary Movie V

Entertainment in Video → Region B BD
£23 Approx



When our first review copy turned up in the post with a huge dent in the disc, we thought it must have been an

accident. It was only when a replacement Blu-ray allowed us to sit through this painfully unfunny compendium of fart gags and film spoofs that we realised that it must have been a deliberate attempt on the part of the postman to save us from having to watch this cinematic dreck. The Blu-ray disc itself is little better due to the inconsistent nature of the film's AVC 1.78:1 1080p visuals and the meagre batch of extra features it contains (just eight, equally unfunny, deleted scenes).



Jumper 3D

20th Century Fox → All-region BD
£25 Approx



Lacking the mainstream appeal of *I, Robot* or *Predator*, Doug Liman's 2008 sci-fi flop wasn't the most obvious

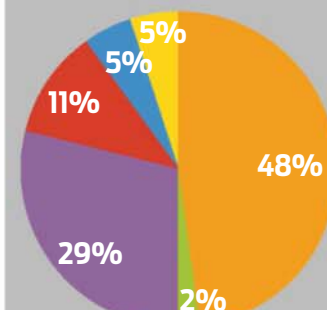
addition to Fox's roster of retconned 3D films. However, watching this stereoscopic presentation (re-framed at 1.78:1), the appeal becomes a little more obvious, as visually it offers up plenty of interesting opportunities for 3D effects. Sadly, like *I, Robot* before it, the conversion itself is pretty hit-and-miss. Some shots look excellent, others surprisingly flat – and there are a few errors to be found as well. The DTS-HD MA 5.1 mix is as lively as ever, but there are no extras included.



WE ASKED...

Which was the best Star Trek TV series?

■ The Original Series
■ The Animated Series
■ The Next Generation ■ DS9
■ Voyager ■ Enterprise



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Revenge is a dish best served cold...

...but you might not want it to be as chilly as this Colin Farrell offering

→ DEAD MAN DOWN

With its no-nonsense title and flashy trailer, many may have thought that *Dead Man Down* was a fast-paced action thriller. And in its opening scenes this certainly looks possible, as Colin Farrell's New York gangster Vic discovers a dead colleague in a freezer, and then saves his boss's life during a gun-fight in a drugs factory. Yet from then on the pace slows, and you remember that this is the debut Hollywood movie from Danish director Niels Arden Oplev (*The Girl With The Dragon Tattoo*), and he has more on his mind that shootouts and mob violence. Noomi Rapace is introduced, playing a scarred woman, Beatrice, who wants a favour from Vic, but he is soon shown to have mental scars of his own – what follows is both an intriguing but at times frustratingly slow thriller, with a touch of European art house movie about it. A decent suspense flick, but perhaps not what you were expecting.

Picture: Considering the movie's tone, it's no shock to find Oplev and cinematographer Paul Cameron opting for dimly-lit interiors and an anaemic colour swatch – Farrell's angst just wouldn't play well in sun-drenched panoramas. This AVC 2.40:1 1080p encode delivers their vision well, with plenty of well-defined black tones and detail retained in shadows, and only a couple of instances where the low-light shoot seems excessively grainy. It's also a bisteringly sharp image, although some haloing around Noomi Rapace appears to be a side-effect of edge enhancement, rather than her natural beauty.

Audio: The DTS-HD MA 5.1 soundmix here is as muted as *Dead Man Down*'s colour palette. There are



HCC VERDICT

Dead Man Down

→ EntertainmentOne
→ Region B BD → £23 Approx
WE SAY: An intriguing but slow-burning crime thriller on a Blu-ray that's good, but not great

Movie ★★★★★

Picture ★★★★★

Audio ★★★★★

Extras ★★★★★

Overall ★★★★★



This was the last time Bob would fly on a budget airline

frequent scenes – often Vic and Beatrice chatting morosely – where the rear channels are almost put to bed entirely, so much so that it comes as a shock when they're used to add depth to the sound of falling rain or the occasional honked car horn. And apart from a few ominous thuds to enliven the otherwise low-key orchestral score, the subwoofer channel doesn't get a sniff beyond the film's opening and closing gun battles, both of which are suitably energetic and immersive. Dialogue is also nicely prominent in the mix – key to helping you keep abreast of the unravelling plot.

Extras: There's not much in the way of bonus goodies on EntertainmentOne's single-platter release – just three featurettes with a combined running time of around 23 minutes, covering the cinematography, cast and crew opinions and the film's brace of 'firefights'. All are in HD; none will you want to watch more than once.

'She cannae take it any more Captain!'



Kirk versus Khan: Round Three

To boldly go where no man has gone before? Guess again as this sequel retreads familiar ground



→ STAR TREK INTO DARKNESS

After violating Starfleet's prime directive while attempting to save the indigenous population of an alien planet from a volcano, Captain James T. Kirk (Chris Pine) is stripped of command of the U.S.S. Enterprise. However, when rogue Federation agent John Harrison (Benedict Cumberbatch) starts a one-man war against Starfleet that results in the deaths of several high-ranking officers, Kirk is reinstated and the Enterprise is sent on a mission to track down and terminate the galactic terrorist.

In 2009 J.J. Abrams achieved what many thought impossible. He took the reins of the increasingly insular and aimless *Star Trek* franchise and transformed it into a motion picture blockbuster that mainstream audiences could connect with. Sadly, his eagerly-awaited sequel finds *Star Trek* ignoring this newfound mainstream appeal in favour of keeping geeks happy with obscure references and lifting scenes wholesale from the previous fan-favourite sequel *Star Trek II: The Wrath of Khan*.

Mercifully, *Star Trek Into Darkness* is never as dull and plodding as the majority of the original films were. Instead it literally hits the ground running and moves from epic action scene to epic action scene at a blistering pace, ensuring that the 132 minute running time never drags.

Also worthy of praise is the continued development of Kirk, Mr. Spock (Zachary Quinto) and Dr. 'Bones' McCoy (Karl Urban). The film always comes to life whenever the trio start bantering with

one another, and there's never any doubt about how strong their friendship is, or the high regard they hold for one another.

Cumberbatch also deserves plenty of praise for his villainous turn as genetically-enhanced superman Kahn Noonien Singh (possibly the worst kept secret in the history of cinema and one that is even blown on the back of the Blu-ray sleeve). Switching from almost reptilian cool to barely suppressed rage at a moment's notice, it's the kind of performance that's sure to make Hollywood sit up and pay attention.

Unfortunately, the rich characterisation elsewhere also serves to highlight a problem with *Star Trek Into Darkness'* female characters.

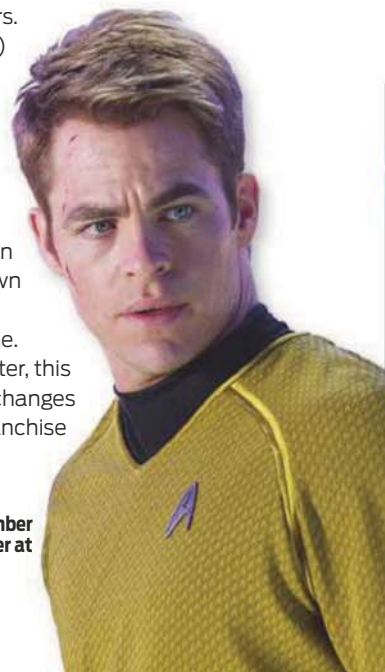
While Uhura (Zoë Saldana) gets time out from simpering over Spock to join the action on a couple of occasions, poor old Carol Marcus (Alice Eve) seems to only exist so that Kirk (and teenage boys) can leer at her as she strips down to her underwear in a completely gratuitous scene.

So even if it isn't a disaster, this is a problematic film. And changes are clearly needed if the franchise is to live long and prosper.



Benecio del Toro was originally in talks to play the part of Khan

Kirk spots another female member of the Enterprise's crew to leer at



DEMO SCREEN...

Star Trek Into Darkness

Time code: 086.31 – 090.54



Ship-to-ship: In order to get onto the U.S.S. Vengeance Kirk and Khan must space-jump across from the Enterprise. The only snag? A field of debris floating between the two craft.



Interstellar skydive: After a few beats of complete silence the DTS-HD MA 7.1 soundfield suddenly roars into life using its superb positioning and panning put you right next to Kirk as he flies through space.



Cracking up: Things get even worse when a Kirk's helmet is hit and starts to crack. The combination of the 360-degree 7.1 audio and crystal-clear AVC 1080p encode really sell his P.O.V. shots.



Stay on target: Finally reunited after a difficult run through the spacecraft debris, Kirk and Khan finally close in on the airlock they're aiming for. But will Scotty get it open in time?

Spock always fancied himself as the next 007



Picture: *Star Trek Into Darkness* looks absolutely sensational on Blu-ray. The AVC 2.40:1 1080p encode starts off incredibly strongly with a chase through a bright red alien forest and never lets up.

Colour reproduction is absolutely spot-on, with beautifully rich primaries evident throughout. Detailing is immaculate, revealing the most intricate textures on screen. Blacks are deep and luxurious. And while whites sometimes run a little hot, they don't impact negatively on the overall contrast of the hi-def imagery.

Audio: We have a sneaky suspicion that you're going to see mention of the *Star Trek Into Darkness* Blu-ray cropping up a heck of a lot in loudspeaker and AVR reviews in future issues of HCC.

Like its predecessor, this sequel's reference quality Dolby TrueHD 7.1 soundtrack is a thing of beauty. Mixing the intricately detailed with the astonishingly bombastic, the acoustic imaging the track provides

completely immerses the viewer in the on-screen action and is guaranteed to push your home cinema setup to its absolute limits.

Highlights are too many to mention, but we'd happily recommend spinning up Khan's fight with the Klingons in Chapter 6, the space jump in Chapter 10 (see above) or the crash landing in Chapter 13 for great examples of the excellent range, power and channel separation inherent in the sound design.

Extras: Paramount seems to have gone out of its way to annoy fans with its handling of *Star Trek Into Darkness*' extra features.

As if the fact that the Blu-ray only includes six short behind-the-scenes featurettes (*Creating the Red Planet*, *Attack on Starfleet*, *The Klingon Homeworld*, *The Enemy of My Enemy*, *Ship to Ship* and *Brawl by the Bay*) wasn't insulting enough, it turns out that this is only about a quarter of the bonus features created to support the film.

So where are the rest of them? Well, in its infinite wisdom, Paramount has divvied the rest of the features up as retailer exclusives – meaning there's no way that a fan of the film can get them all without buying multiple copies of the Blu-ray from different stores. And to compound the problem, J.J. Abrams also recorded an 'Enhanced Commentary' for the film, but that is only being made available via the iTunes version of the movie – and even then Paramount has yet to confirm what (if any) territories it will be available in outside the US!



Even the Blu-ray's animated menu screens are prone to lens flare!



HCC VERDICT

Star Trek Into Darkness 3D

→ Paramount

→ All-region BD → £28 Approx

WE SAY: This middling *Star Trek* sequel is lacking in extras, but still makes for a superior HD demo disc

Movie ★★★★★

Picture ★★★★★

Audio ★★★★★

Extras ★★☆☆☆

Overall ★★★★★

ARCADE ACTION

Bigscreen home entertainment isn't just about movies anymore. Check out these two videogames vying for time on your cinema system...

Saints Row IV

Deep Silver → Xbox 360/PS3/PC → £45 Approx



Rumoured to have started life as DLC for 2011's *Saints Row: The Third* dubbed *Enter the Dominatrix*, this open-world game finally divorces the franchise from its roots as a *Grand Theft Auto* wannabe and sees it reborn as a self-parodying superhero game.



Kicking off shortly after the events of *Saints Row: The Third*, the new game finds you elected to President of the United States after saving Washington from a nuclear missile attack. Sadly, your fun is short-lived thanks to marauding alien invaders who take over the Earth and trap you in a *Matrix*-like simulation of the town of Steelport. Helpfully, your fight against the system is now aided by the ability to 're-write the code', giving you access to superpowers.

While all of the traditional *GTA* trappings are present and correct, *Saints Row IV* arguably owes more to the likes of *Prototype* and, particularly, *Crackdown* than it does to Rockstar's blockbuster. So while there are plenty of vehicles waiting to be hijacked, the need to do so is negated by the fact that after about an hour of play you'll be running faster than a car and flying higher than a plane all by yourself. Coupled to a knowing and playfully stupid sense of humour, it all adds up to a game that proves endlessly entertaining and open to all manner of ridiculous experimentation.



The Bureau: XCOM Declassified

Take 2 Interactive → Xbox 360/PS3/PC → £45 Approx



Last year's *XCOM: Enemy Unknown* was one of 2012's biggest surprises, managing to successfully transfer a very complex PC control scheme to console gamepads and open the genre up to a much more mainstream audience. This prequel of sorts is even more geared towards console gamers, thanks to a switch in

gameplay style away from resource management and turned-based strategy and towards a third-person squad-based shooter.

The one element that *The Bureau: XCOM Declassified* undoubtedly gets right is its 1960s styling. This is a

seriously good-looking game that delivers plenty of period atmosphere as you guide protagonist William Carter and his two squad-mates around the streets of small-town America, ducking behind cover and blasting away at a multitude of pesky alien invaders. However, the shift into third-person perspective proves less effective than you might expect. Indeed, the game regularly finds you getting swamped by the sheer number of enemies – couple this with the fact that several types of enemies prove to be little more than bullet-absorbing tanks and it ends up lacking the strategic nous of *...Enemy Unknown*. What you end up with is a title stuck somewhere between a third-person shooter and a God's-eye strategy game, and one that is unlikely to really satisfy fans of either type.



Treme: Season Three

HBO Home Entertainment
→ All-region BD → £45 Approx



Corrupt cops and housing scams take centre stage alongside the expected focus on New Orleans' music and cuisine in the latest season of David Simon's engrossing post-Katrina drama

series. As always, the primary reason for catching this music-heavy show on Blu-ray remains the richly melodic DTS-HD MA 5.1 soundtracks, although the AVC 1.78:1 1080p encodes are equally impressive. Extras follow the established template of commentaries, on-screen info and interviews.



Community: Season Three

Sony Pictures → R2 DVD
£25 Approx



Dan Harmon's quirky community college sitcom hits all new highs in this third year, packing in even more pop culture gags (everything from parallel timelines to retro

videogames and even a *Doctor Who* spoof). This three-disc DVD release features surprisingly sharp anamorphic 1.78:1 transfers alongside extremely effective Dolby Digital 5.1 soundtracks. The platters are also crammed with goodies, includes chat-tracks for every episode, 31 deleted scenes, four outtakes reels and a pair of episode-specific behind-the-scenes featurettes.



The Vampire Diaries: Season Four

Warner Home Video → All-region BD
£40 Approx



It may feature a protagonist who has just joined the undead and is involved in a supernatural love triangle, but *The Vampire Diaries* is far from being the TV equivalent of the *Twilight* films.

Action-packed and sharply-written, it's far closer in tone to *Buffy: The Vampire Slayer* – although this year's meandering quest for a vampire cure drags on far too long for its own good. Thankfully, the AVC 1.78:1 1080p imagery and DTS-HD MA 5.1 sound are both excellent and this set includes plenty of extras.



Tom finds himself on a highway to the danger zone yet again



Cruising for AV super stardom

Tron: Legacy director's latest film aims for the stars with its awesome audio-visual credentials

→ OBLIVION

The year is 2077 and the Earth lies in ruins following an invasion by an alien force. While humanity managed to win the war, it came at the cost of our world. The only humans remaining on Earth are Jack Harper (Tom Cruise) and Vica Olsen (Andrea Riseborough), a two-person technical team tasked with overseeing robot drones. But when a vessel crashes to Earth containing a mysterious woman (Olga Kurylenko) who haunts his dreams, Harper begins to realise that all is not as it seems.

In one of the extras on this Blu-ray, director Joseph (Tron: Legacy) Kosinski reveals that *Oblivion* was inspired by his love of *The Twilight Zone*. And there's the problem. While this reactionary sci-fi story would have made for a fine episode of the series, it's pretty much stretched to breaking point across the two-hour-plus running time of *Oblivion*.

Still, there's a lot to admire here – particularly the efforts made at world-building, which have resulted in a startlingly cohesive and utterly believable sci-fi landscape for the story and characters to inhabit. The visual effects are stunning.

Picture: Filmed on Sony CineAlta F65 and RED Epic digital cams, *Oblivion* touches down on Blu-ray with an AVC-encoded image that is the very definition of a perfect 1080p transfer.

The 2.40:1 visuals are razor-sharp at all times, boasting exquisite delineation and remarkable amounts of fine detail in every single shot. Colours veer towards the cooler end of the

Cruise insists people look at him through binoculars to make him appear taller



HCC VERDICT

Oblivion

→ Universal Pictures

→ All-region BD → £25 Approx

WE SAY: A spectacular AV package ensures that this disc deserves a place in every home cinema fan's collection

Movie ★★★★★

Picture ★★★★★

Audio ★★★★★

Extras ★★★★★

Overall ★★★★★

spectrum, giving the film's interiors a deliberately sterile look that is reproduced here flawlessly. Blacks are deep and stable, and crush is kept to an absolute minimum.

Audio: While far from a traditional action blockbuster, *Oblivion*'s DTS-HD Master Audio 7.1 soundtrack is every bit the equal to the Blu-ray's astonishing image quality.

Environmental effects ensure that the surrounds are kept active throughout. Even better, though, is the incredible low-end grunt in the mix. As Jack's Bubbleship touches down in the abandoned stadium in Chapter 2, the roar of the thrusters sweeps over you from the rear to the front backed up by incredible sonic power.

To top it all, M83's electronic score sounds utterly sublime and is perfectly balanced. Another demo disc for your collection.

Extras: Director Joseph Kosinski joins Tom Cruise for *Oblivion*'s audio commentary – and once the obligatory mutual appreciation is done with, it turns out to be a very informative track packed with info about every aspect of the production. Well worth a listen if you enjoyed the film.

Promise of a New World: Making Oblivion houses five behind-the-scenes featurettes covering the film's origin, the creation of the Bubbleship, stunts, visual effects and the film's score. Together they add up to about 48 minutes of content.

Finally, there are four deleted/alternate scenes and an isolated version of M83's score (albeit disappointingly presented in lossy DTS 5.1).



Gibson's mad, mad, mad, world

There's a good chance that Max won't be the only one feeling mad after seeing this triple-pack

→ MAD MAX COLLECTION

The ultimate post-apocalyptic action franchise, the *Mad Max* series does away with internal consistency across its three instalments, but it can't be beaten when it comes to epic automotive deconstruction. The standout flick is easily the second one (*The Road Warrior*) but fans will probably want to gorge on the whole trilogy while they wait for the long-delayed fourth movie – *Fury Road* – to screech onto our screens.

Picture: All three films come to Blu-ray with AVC 1080p encodes presented in the original aspect ratio (2.35:1 for the first, 2.40:1 for the sequels). As you'd expect, the image quality improves as the films go along, with the decidedly low-budget *Mad Max* suffering from some minor print damage and speckling that is nowhere to be seen on the others.

The Road Warrior appears to use exactly the same encode as the old individual Blu-ray release, and still delivers a pleasingly robust image that copes extremely well with the motorised mayhem during the final set-piece.

Beyond Thunderdome takes the detail and clarity up another notch, resulting in the best-looking version of the film we've ever seen.

Audio: Before talking about the sound quality, it's time for a quick history lesson. When *Mad Max* was originally picked up for distribution in the US an enterprising producer decided that nobody would be able to understand the cast's Australian accents and had all of the film's dialogue dubbed by a US voice

cast. Unsurprisingly, the end result wasn't particularly pleasant.

What does this have to do with the Blu-ray? Well, while we commend Warner Home Video for including both the original mix and the dub on this Blu-ray, it has made the baffling decision to include the former as a lossy Dolby Digital 5.1 remix, and the latter as a DTS-HD MA 2.0 track. Given that the dub is just unlistenable bad, it's an unforgivable thing to do – especially as MGM's US disc offered a lossless version of the original Australian track.

Thankfully, the two sequels fare rather better with perfectly acceptable DTS-HD MA 5.1 mixes of the original production audio. Naturally, there are limitations given the source material, but overall they're pretty effective and remain as faithful as possible to the original cues.

Extras: Not only does the UK Blu-ray release of the original *Mad Max* make a mess of the audio, it also misses out on pretty much all of the extra features that appeared on MGM's US release. All that's included here is the film's trailer.

Mad Max 2: The Road Warrior steps up a gear with the inclusion of an intro to the film by Leonard Maltin and an audio commentary by director George Miller and cinematographer Dean Semler, in addition to the trailer. In other words, the exact same extras that appeared on the film's earlier standalone Blu-ray release.

While *Mad Max Beyond Thunderdome* only offers a trailer, fans can at least take solace in the fact that in this instance the US disc didn't offer anything better.



HCC VERDICT

Mad Max Collection

→ Warner Home Video

→ All-region BD → £30 Approx

WE SAY: Irritating flaws and lacklustre extras make for a disappointing hi-def triple-pack for this cult action trilogy

Movie ★★★★★

Picture ★★★★★

Audio ★★★★★

Extras ★★★★★

Overall ★★★★★

The Dyatlov Pass Incident

Anchor Bay → Region B BD
£20 Approx



Once upon a time Renny Harlin thrilled filmgoers with action blockbusters like *Die Hard 2* and *Cliffhanger*.

These days he's directing former *Hollyoaks* star Gemma Atkinson in a found-footage chiller that uses the real 1959 Dyatlov Pass mystery as the springboard for an unconvincing and scare-free addition to the tired genre. The Blu-ray platter copes reasonably well with the digital AVC 1.85:1 photography – although there are some source-related banding issues in a handful of scenes. Perfunctory extras take the form of a 10-min *Making of...* and a trailer.



The Assassins

Universal Pictures → All-region BD
£16 Approx



Anybody hoping for opulent visuals on a par with the likes of *Hero* or *House of Flying Daggers* are in for a shock with

this new historical epic starring Chow Yun-fat. Indeed, *The Assassins* is one of the least satisfying hi-def experiences that HCC has had in some time. The AVC 2.40:1 1080p encode is both dull and poorly resolved, lacking the refinement and clarity you'd expect. Far better is the Mandarin DTS-HD MA 5.1 mix, which employs the full 360-degree soundstage to terrific effect (a lossy DTS 5.1 English dub is also included). Extras include one deleted scene and three short featurettes.



Passion

Metrodome → R2 DVD
£15 Approx



It seems rather ironic that just as one label is giving Brian De Palma's early films the deluxe treatment on Blu-ray,

another is unceremoniously dumping his latest film on DVD. Based on the 2010 French thriller *Crime d'amour*, *Passion* finds the filmmaker channelling his early stylistic ticks through an enjoyably twisty tale of corporate intrigue that plays out in the boardroom and the bedroom. Metrodome's DVD offers absolutely nada in the way of extras as well as a modest anamorphic 1.85:1 transfer and DD5.1 audio – so fans may want to import the French Blu-ray release instead.



I'm So Excited

Pathé/20th Century Fox → Region B BD
£25 Approx



After an extraordinary run of form in recent years, Spanish director Pedro Almodovar comes a bit of a cropper

with this rather melancholy comedy-drama about a trio of gay air stewards trying to pacify and entertain first-class passengers on a plane suffering from a technical malfunction. Still, if the story itself struggles to keep your attention, the AVC 1.85:1 1080p has no such worries as it brings Almodovar's bright and colourful aesthetic to your TV. The Spanish DTS-HD MA 5.1 is less exciting, keeping largely to the front stereo spread. Extras include three short features and two trailers.



Lions and tigers and bears, oh my!

Disney polishes another of its crown jewels for this Diamond Edition hi-def release

→ THE JUNGLE BOOK: DIAMOND EDITION

Inspired by Rudyard Kipling's stories of the same name, *The Jungle Book* is notable for being the last Disney film that Walt really had a hand in prior to his death, and for the place it maintains in the hearts of the legions of Disney fans.

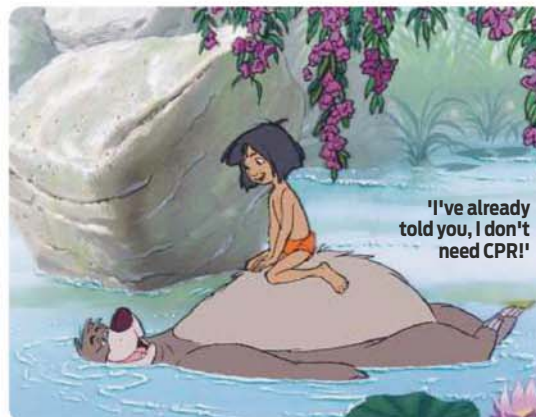
Yes, it's rather episodic and has an ending that comes out of nowhere (one which appears to say that men will throw their friends away for a woman). But who cares when it's so much fun and boasts so many great songs? Altogether now: 'Oh, oobee do, I wanna be like you...'

Picture: Disney has done a truly magnificent job of bringing this much-loved classic to Blu-ray. The film's scratchy line work looks more accurate than ever, the multi-layered animation is perfectly rendered and the painted backdrops are drop-dead gorgeous. It's the best that this 'toon has looked in over 45 years.

Audio: The original mono sound design has been given a DTS-HD MA 7.1 remix for this Blu-ray. For the most part it's still sympathetic to the source

elements, with most of the action centred on the front stereo spread. But occasional spot effects in the surrounds and the enveloping nature

It's enough to give 'king of the swingers' a whole new meaning



of the all-important music are always there to remind you of the track's multichannel attributes.

Extras: Newly created content for this Diamond Edition comes in the form of a brief intro by composer Richard Sherman, an 18-minute promo featurette for Disney's Animal Kingdom theme park, a lengthy alternate ending presented in storyboard form and a wonderful 41-minute documentary that looks at Disney's legendary Nine Old Men (the studio's inner circle of animators) through the eyes of their families.

The remaining extras have all been ported over from previous DVD editions, but are just as valuable as ever. In addition to a fascinating commentary, you also get a five-part *Making of...* (46 minutes), four additional featurettes, discussion of a deleted storyline that would have featured a new character (Rocky the Rhino), a wildlife video for kids, seven deleted songs, sing-along lyrics and music video.



HCC VERDICT

The Jungle Book: Diamond Edition

→ Walt Disney Home Entertainment

→ Region B/C BD → £25 Approx

WE SAY: A beautiful Blu-ray debut for one of Disney's best-loved animated classics. No fan should be without it.

Movie ★★★★★

Picture ★★★★★

Audio ★★★★★

Extras ★★★★★

Overall ★★★★★



Fantasy is child's play for Gilliam

Ex-*Python*'s imaginative family film benefits from a brand-new 2K Blu-ray restoration

→ TIME BANDITS

Armed with a map showing the locations of all of the known holes in the fabric of the universe, a group of disgruntled little people who used to work for the Supreme Being embark on an audacious scheme to rob their way through time. However, when one hole takes them through to the bedroom of an 11-year old boy, they find themselves with an unexpected extra member of their gang.

Time Bandits may have turned 32 this year, but it remains one of the most imaginative and smartest family films ever made. Dark and disturbing in the same way as the best genuine fairy tales, Terry Gilliam has crafted that rarest of things – a kids' film that is just as much fun for adults as it is for younger viewers.

Picture: Derived from a new 2K restoration, Arrow's Blu-ray release of *Time Bandits* is a huge improvement on Optimum Releasing's artefact-ridden 2009 release. While the nature of the

source material means that it will never look a million dollars, this AVC 1.85:1 encode does bring plenty of lustre back to the imagery, cleaning up print damage, stabilising the colour grading and retaining the native grain structure.

Audio: The disc includes an LPCM version of the original stereo mix and a DTS-HD MA 5.1 remix. Once again, the source material is the only really limiting factor here, with some rather hollow-sounding dialogue and a touch of reverb to some of the Foley effects. The 5.1 remix itself gets reasonable use out



of the surrounds for positional effects, although the LFE channel doesn't have much to say for itself outside of the handful of moments when the Supreme Being turns up.

Extras: While it's a shame that Arrow was unable to get its hands on the old DVD commentary for this release, it makes amends with a collection of brand-new supplementary features.

Director Terry Gilliam, co-writer Michael Palin, Peerless Camera Company founder Kent Houston, actor David Warner, costumer designer James Acheson and set designer Milly Burns have all been interviewed for the disc. Also on offer are a script breakdown featurette narrated by Burns, the trailer, a restoration demo and a collectible booklet.

HCC VERDICT

Time Bandits

→ Arrow Video

→ Region B BD → £23 Approx

WE SAY: A huge improvement on the previous Blu-ray release and definitely worth the double-dip if you're a fan

Movie ★★★★★

Picture ★★★★★

Audio ★★★★★

Extras ★★★★★

Overall ★★★★★

The Fall of the House of Usher

Arrow Video → Region B BD
£23 Approx



The first of Roger Corman's celebrated cycle of Edgar Allan Poe films, *The Fall of the House of Usher* is an enjoyably odd fright-flick that overcomes its modest budget and dull leading

man with a surfeit of cinematic style and a scenery-chewing performance from Vincent Price. This Blu-ray release gets the best out of the film's lurid visuals with its lovingly restored AVC 2.40:1 1080p encode and backs it up with a solid LPCM dual-mono soundtrack. A director's commentary, an interview with former Corman protégé Joe Dante and an archival French TV interview with Vincent Price are among the disc's superb extras.

The Last American Virgin

Arrow Video → Region B BD
£23 Approx



In the wake of the international success of his 1978 Israeli coming-of-age film *Lemon Popsicle*, writer-director

Boaz Davidson went to Hollywood and directed this remake. The result is an odd mix of the bawdy and the bittersweet – think *Porky's* with more tragedy and heartbreak. Arrow's Blu-ray package boasts typically pleasing fine-grain AVC 1.85:1 1080p visuals and an LPCM 2.0 stereo mix that does wonders for the soundtrack's compendium of '80s pop hits. Extras include a quartet of lengthy interviews and the original trailer.

Maison Close: Season Two

Arrow Films → Region B BD
£30 Approx



The 'ladies' of the 19th Century Parisian brothel Le Paradis find themselves up to their collective *décolletage* in trouble yet again in this second season of the racy French TV series. Much like the first, it serves up an intoxicating mix of historical intrigue, crime and (of course) sex, set to an eclectic soundtrack of modern music. While completely lacking in extras, this two-disc Blu-ray does deliver eight impressive AVC 2.40:1 1080i encodes that handle the stylish visuals with ease. Audio is limited to LPCM 2.0 – but given the subject matter, this isn't a major issue.





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FILM FRANCHISE

The Matrix

This issue we celebrate the film series that helped put DVD on the map



'It is inevitable': The Wachowskis cast Hugo Weaving as Agent Smith after witnessing his award-winning performance as the blind photographer in the 1991 Australian drama *Proof*



Morpheus is named after the Greek God of dreams

THERE WAS NEVER any doubt in the minds of film fans that 1999 would witness the release of the most important sci-fi flick in decades. What nobody predicted was that it wouldn't be the long-awaited *Star Wars: Episode I – The Phantom Menace*. Instead, an R-rated Keanu Reeves movie created by two brothers, whose only previous directorial experience was the 1996 lesbian crime flick *Bound*, rocked multiplexes.

Like some kind of brilliant cinematic magpie, *The Matrix* cherry-picked all the best

bits the things its creators (and therefore its target audience) loved, and dressed it up in a funky new filming technique dubbed 'bullet time'. Using an array of cameras placed around a subject, bullet time gives the illusion of events happening in slow-motion while the camera moves around it at normal speed. Back in 1999 it was a totally unique form of visual dynamics and introduced movie-goers to a brand-new flavour of cinematic language – one that has since been adopted by countless other filmmakers.



The Matrix movies broke new ground in special effects with bullet-time photography and CG 'virtual actors'



Road to nowhere: The production team built a 1.5-mile stretch of three-lane highway at the decommissioned Alameda Point Navy Base to shoot *The Matrix Reloaded's* spectacular chase sequence



But the success of *The Matrix* at cinemas is only part of the story. It was also the first title to show the versatility of the DVD format with its *Follow the White Rabbit* feature, which allowed viewers to drop out of the movie at key moments to watch a behind-the-scenes video. It became the first DVD to reach sales of three million copies in the US.

With two more big-budget sequels under its belt and an early HD DVD trilogy release, it's no surprise that the *Matrix* series has a place in every home cinema fan's collection.

PICK OF THE BEST...

1 The Matrix

The Wachowskis' 1999 blockbuster mixed together a diverse range of influences (including comic books, anime, martial arts, cyberpunk and philosophy) to create one of the greatest sci-fi movies ever made. Its influence on the genre continues to echo today. Basically, if you don't like *The Matrix*, there's something wrong with you.

2 The Animatrix

Released alongside *The Matrix Reloaded* in 2003, this enjoyable direct-to-DVD anthology consists of nine short animated films that help fill in the backstory of the Wachowskis' universe, including the original war between man and machine.

3 The Matrix Reloaded

There's plenty to enjoy about this first *Matrix* sequel – not least the spectacular fight with multiple Agent Smiths and climactic car chase. Just make sure to fast-forward through all of that nonsense with The Architect if you want to stay sane...

AND THE WORST...

The Matrix Revolutions

A franchise that started so promisingly ends in a somewhat dispiriting fashion. Starting with a whimper in a limbo-like subway station (eh?), *The Matrix Revolutions* plods along towards a lacklustre conclusion, even managing to make the ultimate battle between man and machine messy and grating rather than spectacular.

COLLECTIBLES

Demonstrate your love for *The Matrix* movies with these goodies...

The Matrix Comics: Vol. 1 & 2



Given the debt the series owes to comic books, it's no surprise that *The Matrix* eventually made the jump into comics itself. These volumes collect 30 strips originally published online.

The Matrix: Path of Neo



Considering its obvious links to the world of videogames, *The Matrix* didn't have a great track record with spin-off games. Of the three released, this last effort was the most fun as it finally allowed gamers to take control of Neo.

Neo: The Matrix Reloaded – Chateau Scene Action Figure



The highlight of McFarlane Toys' range of *Matrix* collectibles, this diorama recreates a fight scene from *The Matrix Reloaded* and boasts two action figures and 'break-apart play action'!

BFI Modern Classics: The Matrix



Fancy delving a little deeper into *The Matrix*? If so, you won't go far wrong with author and pop culture guru Joshua Clover as he decodes some of the film's possible meanings in this approachable and entertaining analytic text.

THE ULTIMATE COLLECTION...

Want to complete your collection of *Matrix* discs? Then you'll need all of these...

The Matrix (R2 DVD)
The Matrix Revised (R2 DVD)

The Matrix: Collector's Edition (R2 DVD)

The Matrix: Special Edition Boxset (R2 DVD)

The Animatrix (R2 DVD)

The Matrix Reloaded (R2 DVD)

The Matrix Revolutions (R2 DVD)

The Ultimate Matrix Collection (R2 DVD)



DVD or bust!

The Ultimate Matrix Collection: Limited Edition (R2 DVD, pictured)

The Matrix, The Matrix Reloaded, The Matrix Revolutions Trilogy (R2 DVD)

The Complete Matrix Collection (HD DVD)

The Ultimate Matrix Collection [includes two DVDs of extras] (HD DVD – US Import)

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Flaunting the brand's new Triluminos edge LED lighting, this 40in set majors on a startling colour performance, plus crisp delineation and authentic black levels. The 'Sense of Quartz' styling is a winner, too. Pricey, but worth it. *HCC #222*

**Panasonic TX-P60ZT65** → £3,800 ★★★★★

This plasma lives up to its 'Beyond Reference' billing, with the best 1080p picture in town – imagery is effortlessly cinematic. But at this price, you might want 4K... *HCC #223*

**Samsung PS64F8500** → £3,000 ★★★★★

A new panel design has given Samsung's plasma tech a much needed injection of brightness and contrast. The result is a premium bigscreen display that constantly wows. *HCC #221*

**Samsung UE46F8000** → £1,800 ★★★★★

The F8000 tops Samsung's LED lineup (if you exclude the £35,000 S9 Ultra HD set) and is a consistently good performer. Bright, vivid images married to a super-stylish design. *HCC #221*

**LG 84LM960V** → £22,500 ★★★★★

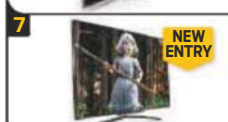
LG's debut Ultra HD (4K) TV is an eye-opening look at the future of home cinema technology, with upscaled BDs benefitting from the pixel push. Hardly cheap, though. *HCC #218*



NEW ENTRY

Sony KDL-65X9005A → £6,000 ★★★★★

The first 'affordable' Ultra HD screen we've tested, Sony's 65in next-gen panel is a cracker, offering pin-sharp visuals and brilliant Passive 3D. Blacks aren't best-in-breed, though. *HCC #224*



NEW ENTRY

Philips 55PFL8008 → £2,500 ★★★★★

Philips' current flagship, this 55in sports a premium design and provides electrifying HD images. The Smart portal could be improved, however, and setup is fiddly. *HCC #224*

**Philips 46PFL9707** → £2,300 ★★★★★

Philips' second iteration of its Moth Eye screen technology continues to offer astonishing contrast. This set is at its best with 2D material, though: crosstalk with 3D is apparent. *HCC #216*

**Panasonic TX-L47DT65** → £1,700 ★★★★★

The first of Panasonic's new 2013 LED TVs impresses with bright, sharp images and Passive 3D. Twin-tuner functionality is a welcome addition to the Smart revolution. *HCC #220*

**LG 50PA650T** → £500 ★★★★★

A 50in plasma TV for £500 is hard to ignore, and this LG rewards thrifty buyers with a solid performance. No 3D or Smart tech here – just bigscreen HD images and neat styling. *HCC #219*

TECH INFO: TELEVISIONS



Plasma or LCD?: The TV market is becoming increasingly dominated by LED-lit LCD screens that are much, much thinner than traditional cold cathode fluorescent lamp (CCFL) screens. For 42in and above, plasma display panels (PDPs) come into play, although LED screens up to 70ins are also hitting the high street – and 84in 4K panels are also on the way. Plasma screens generally offer superior black levels, better viewing angles and less 3D crosstalk, but less brightness and a higher energy consumption. There's also a more limited choice – with just Samsung, LG and Panasonic selling plasma TVs in the UK.



Active or Passive: At the beginning of the 3D revolution, most TVs featured the Active system that uses relatively expensive, powered 3D specs to deliver Full HD images to each eye. Passive 3D TVs, which are increasingly common and now sold by LG, Philips, Toshiba, Sony, and Panasonic, have a filter over the screen and use non-powered specs with polarising filters. The glasses are cheap as chips, but the resolution of Full HD 3D is halved to 540 lines horizontally (but remains at 1,920 vertically). Glasses-free 3D is in its infancy, with just Toshiba's ZL2 set currently on sale.

TOP 5 BLU-RAY MOVIES

**G.I. Joe: Retaliation**

This sequel is a vast improvement on its predecessor, and new franchise stars Dwayne Johnson and Bruce Willis are backed up by a Blu-ray disc that sounds phenomenal and looks the part, too.

**Oz: The Great and Powerful**

Sam Raimi takes you back to Oz in this colour-laden fantasy that astonishes in its 3D guise. The sense of depth and immersion created here is hard to beat. Disney's 7.1 mix, meanwhile, is an absolute riot.

**Blow Out**

Brian de Palma's atmospheric and meticulously crafted thriller benefits from an HD restoration and a mountain of bonus material that will satiate fans. Be warned though: audio is LPCM stereo.

**Django Unchained**

Arguably Quentin Tarantino's best movie, and certainly his most gorgeous, *Django Unchained* arrives on BD with a breathtaking 2.40:1 transfer and robust 5.1 mix. Our only gripe is the pitiful extras.

**Zero Dark Thirty**

Kathryn Bigelow follows up *The Hurt Locker* with another slice of nail-biting military drama, this time based on the capture of Osama Bin Laden. Universal Pictures' Blu-ray looks, and sounds, great.



Top 10 BLU-RAY PLAYERS

All prices are approx and may have changed

- 1**  **Oppo BDP-103EU → £500 ★★★★★**
 Oppo's first deck for two years was worth waiting for. The universal BDP-103EU features a class-leading build and all manner of bonus goodies, including twin HDMI inputs should you want to lavish some of its processing power on lesser components. AV performance is faultless, and the onscreen menus are superb. All hail the new king of Blu! HCC #215
- 2**  **Sony BDP-S790 → £240 ★★★★★**
 This range-topping deck represents a bargain AV purchase. As well as its 4K upscaling, the Sony delivers BDs and DVDs with aplomb, spins SACDs and offers twin HDMI outputs. HCC #210
- 3**  **Oppo BDP-105EU → £1,000 ★★★★★**
 This heavyweight deck builds on the premium picture performance of the BDP-103EU with a wealth of audiophile upgrades – if you're serious about music, check it out. HCC #217
- 4**  **Marantz UD7007 → £1,000 ★★★★★**
 Marantz's top-line player doesn't bother itself with feature fads like 4K upscaling, preferring to offer faultless BD playback, music streaming (including FLAC) and balanced outputs. HCC #220
- 5**  **Pioneer BDP-450 → £230 ★★★★★**
 An affordable universal player, the BDP-450 ignores analogue outputs and concentrates solely on the digital age. Well-built and an assured performer. HCC #219
- 6**  **Denon DBT-3313UD → £900 ★★★★★**
 As a 'transport', this universal deck lacks built-in decoders and analogue outs, but partner it with one of the brand's AVRs via Denon Link HD and you'll be rewarded. HCC #217
- 7**  **Panasonic DMP-BDT500 → £300 ★★★★★**
 Panasonic's range-topper loves your Blu-ray collection. HD images are sharp and fluid and it doubles as a great Smart hub. The touchpad remote is a bit tricky, though. HCC #208
- 8**  **Sony BDP-S5100 → £140 ★★★★★**
 Smaller than many BD decks, Sony's 'Sense of Quartz'-styled spinner offers SACD compatibility and plenty of VOD content. The menu system needs streamlining, though. HCC #222
- 9**  **Panasonic DMP-BDT330 → £200 ★★★★★**
 New for 2013, this slim-line spinner is a solid choice, although the Viera Connect portal is beginning to feel a bit out-dated and the DMP-BDT500 (above) offers better features. HCC #221
- 10**  **Pioneer BDP-150 → £140 ★★★★★**
 Affordable considering its Super Audio CD playback, Pioneer's BDP-150 is a worthy choice if you can live without much in the way of Smart functionality. HCC #222

TECH INFO: BLU-RAY PLAYERS

Matching your deck to your AV receiver: Blu-ray decks are designed to deliver top-notch images (some do it much better than others, of course) but Blu-ray is also about enjoying superior quality sound. When choosing a player, bear in mind the connectivity and decoding features of your AV receiver. If you're still using an older model that doesn't offer HDMI inputs, then you'll need a Blu-ray player with multichannel analogue audio outputs to enjoy decoded hi-res surround sound formats. Similarly, older but still HDMI-equipped receivers may not be able to cope with 3D video signals, in which case you'll need a deck with dual HDMI outputs – one channeling audio to your receiver amp, the other piping video direct to your TV.

What about the PlayStation 3?: Sony's console ushered in the era of Blu-ray playback in 2006 and still represents an easy path to hi-def heaven. For a low-budget home cinema system, the £200 PS3 Slim (160GB) makes a decent choice – especially if you like playing games (in 3D, if you fancy it). Control via a joystick is a pain, though, and the console runs more noisily than most traditional BD spinners.



DEMO DELIGHT

Prometheus: Ridley Scott's return to the sci-fi genre is a treat for your senses, with a crystal-clear HD image and spine-tingling sonics. The 3D presentation of this outer-space horror is impressive too – it oozes depth and proves utterly immersive

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Blu-ray

At the top of everyone's shortlist



TOP 10 PROJECTORS

All prices are approx
and may have changed**Sony VPL-HW50ES** → £3,000

Another compelling example of Sony's rediscovered obsession with quality and a model that no one in the market for a mid-range projector can afford to ignore. Your film collection is in safe hands here. *HCC #216*

**JVC X55** → £5,000 ★★★★★

Armed with a more flexible, second iteration of JVC's e-shift pixel-polishing wizardry, the X55 offers supreme clarity as well as impressive contrast and near-faultless 3D presentation. *HCC #219*

**JVC X35** → £2,900 ★★★★★

The £3,000 price point is a hot spot for home cinema PJs, and JVC's 'entry-level' D-ILA model is worth auditioning – especially if you're not fussed about its '4K' scaling siblings. *HCC #218*

**Sony VPL-VW1000ES** → £17,000 ★★★★★

Sony's flagship projector is an absolute triumph, giving film fanatics the chance to upscale their Blu-ray collection to 4K resolution. The start of a new era? We hope so! *HCC #209*

**SIM2 Nero 3D-1** → £13,000 ★★★★★

That this isn't SIM2's most expensive model says a lot about the premium projector brand. Yet the DLP-based 3D-1 is still an awe-inspiring beamer, with 3D a particular strength. *HCC #206*

**JVC X75** → £6,500 ★★★★★

This offers an increased contrast over its DLA-X55 stablemate plus greater calibration options. It's a better performer, too, but whether it's worth the extra outlay is your decision. *HCC #225*

**Epson EH-TW8100** → £2,300 ★★★★★

Don't want the ISF certification, 3D glasses or wireless HD transmission of the EH-TW9100W? Then save yourself £600 and grab this well-priced offering instead. *HCC #218*

**Panasonic PT-AT6000E** → £2,900 ★★★★★

Panasonic's newest PJ is a brilliant performer with 2D, but 3D movies could do with an increase in brightness. Maybe that's why you don't get any 3D spex bundled in the box... *HCC #215*

**Optoma HD25** → £800 ★★★★★

Optoma's newest projector provides bright, stable Full HD 3D (with the Active glasses and RF transmitter included) and great-looking 2D visuals for a pittance. A bit noisy. *HCC #220*

**BenQ W1070** → £700 ★★★★★

A brilliant bargain proposition, the BenQ W1070 packs a surprising amount of useful features, including ISF certification. You'll need to fork out extra for 3D glasses, though. *HCC #220*

TECH INFO: PROJECTORS



Installation: Although projectors can be temporarily placed on a cupboard, stand or shelf situated at the rear of the room (use the adjustable feet on its base to level the image so that it aligns with the screen), a much better long-term solution is to mount it on your ceiling with an appropriate bracket. Projectors can be quite heavy, though, so it's important to ensure that the bracket is attached firmly – ideally, it should be secured to a joist. Position your PJ so that an imaginary line from its lens to the opposite side of the room hits the screen exactly half-way along its width. The location of your screen should therefore dictate where your projector is. A decent tape-measure or laser pointer will help you to determine the position.

Throw distance: Throw distance specifies the distance between the projector and screen for a focused image of given size. As the vast majority of projectors are equipped with a zoom lens, minimum and maximum throw distances are often specified – say, 3.01m to 6.08m for a 100in. 16:9 image. Shorter throw distances are ideal for smaller rooms, and longer ones for larger rooms. Simple.

Throw ratio: Sometimes, a manufacturer will quote a throw ratio rather than a throw distance. This is basically the throw distance divided by the image width. To get the projected image size, divide the distance between projector and screen by the specified figure. Once again, the inclusion of a zoom lens means that upper and lower figures are usually specified.

Bedroom TV - comfortable at last

Modern TVs have become light enough to be installed in your bedroom, according to the rules of ergonomics:

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Top 10 SPEAKERS

All prices are approx
and may have changed**KEF R Series 7.1** → £6,500

A 7.1 array mixing both dipolar and direct radiating surrounds, this authoritative package takes its cues from KEF's Blade concept speaker and offers faultless, largescale, home cinema sonics. HCC #217

**Bowers & Wilkins MT-60D** → £2,000 ★★★★★

This 5.1 set sits at the upper end of the sub/sat market, but buyers are rewarded by a potent performance, with the PVID subwoofer dazzling in particular. They look lovely, too. HCC #212

**Q Acoustics Q2000i** → £600 ★★★★★

Another superior sub/sat array from the sonic wizards at Q Acoustics, this marries some surprisingly full-bodied satellite speakers to an easy-to-accommodate 2 x 6in sub. HCC #211

**Wharfedale Diamond 100 HCP** → £950 ★★★★★

Yet another excellent affordable package from Wharfedale, the Diamond 100 HCP offers a sound quality beyond what you might expect from its sub-£1,000 ticket. Maturely styled. HCC #224

**M&K Sound S150 MkII** → £7,150 ★★★★★

A no-nonsense 5.1 package with Hollywood heritage and THX Ultra2 certification, this is all about uncoloured, deeply detailed audio rather than flashy aesthetics. HCC #225

**Acoustic Energy 3 Series 5.1** → £2,000 ★★★★★

An easy-to-accommodate system using bookshelves both front and rear, this brilliantly built array creates a musical, cohesive soundfield backed up by an agile subwoofer. HCC #220

**DALI Epicon 5.1** → £17,000 ★★★★★

Not a cheap option, but buyers of this DALI package are rewarded by a sublime performance. Music and movies benefit from high-end proprietary tech; build quality is fantastic. HCC #222

**KEF T205** → £1,500 ★★★★★

KEF's T Series brings high-quality sonics to your living room with the minimum of intrusion – these thin, flatpanel speakers are far more impressive than you might think. HCC #192

**Monitor Audio MASS 5.1** → £800 ★★★★★

Five satellite speakers joined by a potent (and quite large) 220W subwoofer, MA's MASS 5.1 delivers detailed surround sonics and enough grunt for regular-sized rooms. HCC #217

**KEF E305 5.1** → £900 ★★★★★

The living room-friendly looks of KEF's newest set of 'eggs' will ensure they get a lot of fans, and sound quality, courtesy of the brand's Uni-Q driver array, is superb. HCC #222

TECH INFO: SPEAKERS



Centre speaker: Handles most of the dialogue and onscreen effects. Should be positioned above or below the screen as close to it as possible. Of course, if you're using a projector screen, it should ideally be placed behind it.

Front speakers: Left and right speakers should be positioned either side of the screen, in line with the centre. Turn the speakers in slightly to face the listener if there isn't an even movement of sound across the front of the room.

Subwoofer: Can be positioned wherever it sounds best or can be tucked out of sight due to the non-directional nature of low-frequency signals. Be aware that close positioning in corners or next to walls can create a boomy effect.

Surrounds: Position alongside the listener, pointing in or slightly behind the ears for a good surround effect. The back wall is not a good position for surrounds – it is, in fact, where you should locate the sixth and seventh speakers (rears) in a traditional 7.1 array.

DEMO DELIGHT

Gladiator: While it's often the low-end oomph of your sub that impresses friends and family, the high-frequency poise of your speakers is equally important, lending authenticity to the copious Foley effects that litter film soundtracks. The Colosseum fight sequence in *Gladiator*, with its clashing swords, is a perfect test for your tweeters



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TOP 10 AV RECEIVERS/AV PROCESSORS/POWER AMPLIFIERS

All prices are approx
and may have changed

- 1 Denon AVR-4520 → £2,300 ★★★★★**
 Denon's flagship AVR sees the brand return to the high-end in style. This 9.2-channel powerhouse mixes subtlety and detailing with brute force and dynamism. Build quality is high and its networking talents impressive. *HCC #218*
- 2 Sony STR-DA5800ES → £2,200 ★★★★★**
 Sony's follow up to the STR-DA5700ES continues to pack handy features (built-in Ethernet switching, VOD), ups the channels to 9.2, and brings a suite of great post-processing modes. *HCC #223*
- 3 Arcam AVR750 → £4,000 ★★★★★**
 If all you want from an AV receiver is vast power and effortless performance, this high-end 7.1-channel beast is tailored to you. Little bonus features beyond audio networking. *HCC #225*
- 4 Krell Foundation → £6,500 ★★★★★**
 One of the US marque's more affordable offerings, the Foundation is a seven-channel processor that delivers an insightful, smooth and epic sound. And it looks fab. *HCC #224*
- 5 Marantz AV8801 → £2,500 ★★★★★**
 The brand's high-end 11-channel processor offers balanced outputs and heavyweight engineering. Partner it with the MM8807 power amp for a supreme performance. *HCC #220*
- 6 Pioneer SC-LX86 → £2,000 ★★★★★**
 As the Japanese corp's top dog, the SC-LX86 is packed with features and built to last. Get to grips with its detailed setup process and you're in for multichannel thrills. *HCC #217*
- 7 Cambridge Audio Azur 751R → £1,600 ★★★★★**
 Counting against the Azur 751R is its total lack of networking abilities and old-school interface, but its multichannel and stereo audio performance is hard to beat at this price. *HCC #218*
- 8 Yamaha RX-V675 → £500 ★★★★★**
 The new low/mid-range RX-V675 digs out all the sonic details of your Blu-ray platters and places them across the soundstage. A great-sounding AVR at a good price. Primitive UI. *HCC #225*
- 9 Harman Kardon AVR 370 → £800 ★★★★★**
 One of the most sultry-looking models on the market, HK's mid-ranger offers 8-in, 2-out HDMI hookup, AirPlay and a classy audio performance. The app and UI could be better. *HCC #219*
- 10 Pioneer VSX-923 → £450 ★★★★★**
 This affordable seven-channel AVR has a tight, clear audio presentation and plenty of features, but lacks the in-built Wi-Fi of its rivals – and usability could be improved. *HCC #223*

TECH INFO: AV RECEIVERS



Tackling new heights: You may find your AV receiver offering Dolby Pro-Logic IIz, Audyssey DSX or DTS Neo: X post-processing – possibly all three. All of these can deliver two further Front Height channels, with the aim of adding height and control to the front soundstage, particularly in terms of lifting the centre channel and adding scale to vertical surround effects – rainfall for example. The catch is that you will need to add two new physical speakers, mounted near your ceiling above the regular left and right channel cabinets, and make use of two of the receiver's channels of amplification, which could mean forgoing a second stereo zone or rear surrounds speakers. Note that the Audyssey and DTS modes also cater for Front Wide speakers (pictured above), but this idea seems to be gaining less traction within the industry.

How much power?: Many of the mass-market AV receiver manufacturers are involved in a specifications race to see who can say their model is the most powerful, which can be confusing for consumers. For instance, both Krell's £7,000 S-1500 seven-channel power amp and Yamaha's £500 RX-V671 both claim 7 x 150W – the important part is that Krell's figure is into an eight-Ohm load with all channels driven, and that Yamaha's is with one channel into a four-Ohm load, which is hardly a real-world situation. The best advice is ignore the numbers game and get a demo of your desired AVR with the same, or similar, speakers that you intend to partner it with.



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*with up to 48TB of storage they can automatically rip and store your CDs, DVDs, and Blurays

Top 10 SUBWOOFERS

All prices are approx & may have changed

- 

Bowers & Wilkins DB1 → £3,250 ★★★★★
Featuring a bipolar arrangement of 12in drivers powered by 1,000W of amplification, B&W's stylish flagship sub is a faultless performer, offering both musicality and sheer muscle. Fit to partner the finest of speakers. HCC #197
- 

JL Audio Fathom F212 → £5,900 ★★★★★
The US brand arrives in the UK in style – this 2 x 12in, 3,000W brute not only looks gorgeous, it's capable of a mindblowing performance. Got a big room? Get one of these! HCC #214
- 

Tannoy TS2.12 → £550 ★★★★★
The TS2.12 is easily Tannoy's best woofer yet – using a 12in driver (opposite a passive 12in cone) and 500W amp to deliver a rich, bass performance. Affordable and good-looking, too. HCC #208
- 

Velodyne SPL-800 Ultra → £1,150 ★★★★★
Proof that even 'small' subwoofers can offer a brilliant performance. The 8in driver is helped by a 1,200W amp and mic-assisted room EQ. Tight and fast. HCC #201
- 

REL Acoustics T-7 → £650 ★★★★★
The T-7 uses an 8in driver in tandem with a 10in passive radiator, and features simultaneous speaker-level and LFE inputs and Class A/B amplification. An excellent all-rounder. HCC #223
- 

Bowers & Wilkins PVID → £1,200 ★★★★★
On of the coolest-looking subs on the planet, B&W's revamped PVI uses DSP trickery to craft an opulent low-end performance. The touch-sensitive OLED display is pure class. HCC #212
- 

Velodyne DD18+ → £5,800 ★★★★★
If you have a large cinema room then this second-gen 18in beast from Velodyne will appeal. The performance is as brilliant as you'd expect for the price and specification. HCC #197
- 

REL G1 → £3,300 ★★★★★
A top-of-the range woofer with a price tag to match, buyers of REL's G1 can rest assured they're getting a best-in-breed product. Delivers a warm, rich sound with slam and depth. HCC #208
- 

SVS SB12-NSD → £650 ★★★★★
A 12in driver squeezed into the smallest enclosure possible, the SB12-NSD packs a 400W 'Sledge' amp and offers a weighty yet fast and accurate sound. Looks a bit bland, though. HCC #223
- 

Quadral Qube 10 → £525 ★★★★★
A gorgeous-looking woofer with a build quality that belies its lowly price tag, the Qube 10 takes Quadral's musical heritage and delivers a controlled, poised performance. HCC #223

TECH INFO



Why use more than one sub?: Using two subwoofers (or perhaps four) should, in theory, bring huge rewards in terms of bass performance. But remember that LFE is a tricky beast to control. Running two subs may simply double problems in your room like room boom and suck-outs, where outgoing and reflected bass sounds cancel each other out. If you have some flexibility in where you place subwoofers, trial and error may well throw up some interesting results. The acoustics wizard Floyd E Toole (his book *Sound Reproduction: The Acoustics and Psychoacoustics of Loudspeakers and Rooms* is fine bedtime reading) suggests one LFE sub to either side of the room may be best for accuracy while placing them in the front corners would be best for overall bass power. Yet there is no hard and fast rule as to what will work best for every room, and you may find that simply using one (large) subwoofer is preferable as it's the easiest to get sounding right.

DEMO DELIGHT

Jurassic Park: Steven Spielberg's dinosaur-packed blockbuster is rightly remembered for its cutting-edge CGI, but the surround sound mix is equally impressive. The Blu-ray release provides a perfect test for your subwoofer, with the ominous footfalls of the T-Rex so loud and low in the mix that you should find yourself as terrified as Jeff Goldblum's fast-talking mathematician. If you don't – well, you need a new woofer.

Top 5 HD GAMES



Injustice: Gods Among Us
A beat 'em up incorporating a bevy of DC Comics characters (Superman, Batman, Wonder Woman *et al*) sounds like a great idea – and it is. Accessible to novices and suprisingly fun in the single-player mode. Pow!
★★★★★



Grid 2
Codemasters' sequel is the king of arcade racers, with the souped-up cars handling like a dream and the opposition's AI ensuring victories are well-earned. Photo-realistic vehicles and environments dazzle.
★★★★★



BioShock Infinite
Irrational Games' sequel is a corker, offering a perfect mix of classy visuals, an engrossing narrative and, above all, superb gameplay. Start roaming the floating city of Columbia and you won't want to stop.
★★★★★



Dishonored
This first-person action-adventure puts you in the body of an assassin in a beautifully crafted steampunk world. Convincing characters and great sound design partnered with involving gameplay. We love it.
★★★★★



Tomb Raider
Lara Croft returns in this fantastic reboot that breathes new life into the third-person action genre. With a great story and quality graphics and sonic design it feels like a Hollywood blockbuster. Just with a joypad.
★★★★★

TOP 10 ACCESSORIES

All prices are approx and may have changed

- 1 Devolo dLAN 500 AV Wireless+ → £130 ★★★★★**
 Combining Powerline Ethernet distribution with integrated Wi-Fi, Devolo's dLAN 500 AV Wireless+ starter kit is a great purchase if you're looking to extend and simplify your home network. Performance and build are excellent. *HCC #222*
- 2 Western Digital WD TV Live Hub → £200 ★★★★★**
 The WD's 1TB hard drive explains the £200 ticket. This sleek-looking unit incorporates a faultless user interface and smartphone control, making media browsing a breeze. *HCC #190*
- 3 PSB M4U1 → £220 ★★★★★**
 These closed-back 'phones are excellent all-rounders – agile and clear with music, while possessing enough low-frequency prowess to give weight to BD soundtracks. Comfy, too. *HCC #221*
- 4 Crystal Acoustics Media Matchbox → £55 ★★★★★**
 A dinky media player that will happily play nearly everything you throw at it, including MKV, FLAC and BD/DVD ISO files. Pocket-sized, wallet-friendly and fuss free. *HCC #202*
- 5 Philips Hue → £180 ★★★★★**
 These Wi-Fi enabled lightbulbs might be expensive (this £180 starter pack includes two, plus the Wi-Fi bridge) but making your own multicoloured lighting scheme is a blast. *HCC #220*
- 6 Bose Companion 20 → £200 ★★★★★**
 These desktop speakers have a plasticky build, but the beefy performance they offer for the price can't be sniffed at – and the hardwired remote proves rather cool. *HCC #223*
- 7 One For All Simple 4 → £22 ★★★★★**
 A neatly styled and backlit universal remote control. One For All's budget zapper can tackle up to four devices at once and offers easy setup and handy shortcut keys. *HCC #220*
- 8 Bang & Olufsen Beolit 12 → £600 ★★★★★**
 Pricey for an AirPlay speaker, but the performance and rugged build of B&O's semi-portable Beolit 12 justify the outlay; the onboard 120W amp delivers the goods. *HCC #224*
- 9 DVDO Air → £350 ★★★★★**
 Built around the WiDi standard, this wireless HD sender handles Full HD (including 3D) video and multichannel audio. Build quality and design is good, performance hard to fault. *HCC #214*
- 10 Corsair Voyager Air → £180 ★★★★★**
 A Wi-Fi-enabled portable hard drive (1TB), also with Ethernet, the smart-looking Voyager Air is an ideal partner for 'phone/tablet users. No DLNA media server on board, though. *HCC #223*

TECH INFO: MEDIA PLAYERS



What about my TV?: Many flatscreen TVs from the major brands (Sony, Samsung, Panasonic, LG, Toshiba and Sharp) also incorporate media player functionality, using Ethernet or Wi-Fi to stream from your home network, or from plugged-in USB drives. Most modern Blu-ray players offer this, too. However, file support is rarely as extensive as on dedicated devices from the likes of Western Digital and A.C. Ryan, and our experience shows some are more adept at playback from USB than over a network. Nor (obviously) is a TV or BD player portable. If your media collection extends beyond JPEGs and MP3s into lossless audio rips and esoteric HD video formats, then a standalone player is a good investment.

Storage: You can, if you really want, store all your files on a plethora of USB drives, or on your PC, but it's best to get a NAS (Network Attached Storage) device for simplified sharing of your media across a network with



multiple players, such as one from Netgear's ReadyNAS range (pictured). These dedicated devices often offer RAID array file backup, and are managed via browser software. Storage capacity can be anything from 1TB to 12TB and beyond.

TOP 5 BLU-RAY BOX SETS

**Game of Thrones: The Complete Second Season**

Another ten episodes of prime fantasy TV gets a spectacular Blu-ray release courtesy of HBO Home Entertainment – the picture and sound quality consistently impresses.

★★★★★

**Indiana Jones: The Complete Adventures**

Although the *Raiders of the Lost Ark* restoration isn't the best we've seen, this is a box set that no home cinema fan can afford to be without. And ...*Temple of Doom* is uncut, too!

★★★★★

**Universal Classic Monsters: The Essential Collection**

Bag yourself eight great monster movies given a thorough cleanup by Universal Studios – and marvel at the sheer brilliance of *The Creature from the Black Lagoon* in 3D.

★★★★★

**Boardwalk Empire: Season Three**

An interview with producer Martin Scorsese, plus commentary tracks and interactive viewing mode, round out a great-looking five-disc set for HBO's addictive crime drama.

★★★★★

**The Lord of the Rings Trilogy: Extended Edition**

Peter Jackson's box office-breaking trilogy simply dazzles in HD, and these extended cuts are perfect for Middle-earth maniacs. Watch the movies then savour the 26 hours of extras.

★★★★★



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The award-winning Home Entertainment specialist

TOP 5 PVRs

**Virgin Media TiVo, £subscription**

This triple-tuner PVR offers ultimate recording flexibility, useful features – you can undelete deleted shows! – and awesome TiVo functionality. A no brainer if you're in a cable area

★★★★★

**Sky+HD, £subscription**

Sky's channel choice is second-to-none and its twin tuner 2TB PVR is a perfect partner. The recent EPG tweak is welcome and Anytime (the push VOD service) is brilliant for catching up on new movies.

★★★★★

**Panasonic DMR-HW220, £250**

Panasonic's PVR mixes a 1TB hard drive with its Smart Viera functionality and media streaming – so at £250 it's an absolute steal, regardless of the uninspired design

★★★★★

**Pure Avalon 300R Connect, 1TB, £350**

Pure's debut Freeview+ HD offering is assured. While it can't match YouView for VOD content, the user interface here is unrivalled and four-way HDMI switching a welcome addition

★★★★★

**Samsung BD-F8500, £300**

This 500GB model marries its Freeview+ PVR to a Wi-Fi-toting 3D Blu-ray player and offers copious catch-up TV options – it's just a shame they aren't integrated into the EPG environment

★★★★★

TOP 5 SOUNDBARS

**Yamaha YSP-2200, £800**

Launched back in 2011, but still part of the Yamaha lineup, this premium-priced 'Digital Sound Projector' offers very effective virtual surround, a separate 100W subwoofer and 3-in, 1-out HDMI switching

★★★★★

**Sonos PlayBar, £600**

Sonos' debut 'bar offers a hefty, spacious sound (although it doesn't come with a sub) and it can be easily added to an existing Sonos network for music-on-demand fun. Only connects to your TV via optical

★★★★★

**Orbitsound M12, £400**

While the chunky design and lack of HDMI hookup disappoints, this mid-range 'bar offers an effective, robust stereo performance and provides Bluetooth streaming from your Smart device

★★★★★

**Philips HTL9100, £600**

A soundbar/sub that incorporates two removable side speakers to allow it to become a wireless 5.1 system, this Philips is a neat proposition. Easy to install and with a heavyweight sound

★★★★★

**Bowers & Wilkins Panorama 2, £1,650**

This second-generation soundbar offers no separate subwoofer and is hardly cheap, but B&W's audio expertise shows through, and HDMI hookup aids installation

★★★★★

TOP 5 SYSTEMS

**Panasonic SC-BTT590, £630**

The use of new bamboo/charcoal drivers and noise-shaping tech pays dividends here, with a classy sound quality to match the wealth of features (3D BD, Smart TV and more)

★★★★★

**Samsung HT-F9750W, £1,500**

Samsung's flagship tallboy array uses a vacuum tube pre-amp and offers unique DTS Neo: Fusion seven-channel processing. Powerful, fulsome sound; packed with features

★★★★★

**Harman Kardon BDS470, £650**

Harman's 2.1 system eschews 'net TV and streaming features, but majors in heavyweight build quality and solid AV performance. We tested a 2.1 iteration – 5.1 is also available

★★★★★

**LG BH8220B, £650**

With its silver finish, this is a suitable one-box system to partner with LG's flatscreen TVs, with a commendable, if slightly lacking in HF finesse, sound. Additional features including CD-ripping to USB. Handy

★★★★★

**Panasonic SC-HTB570, £350**

A commendable slim-line 2.1 system that can also be clicked together to make a soundbar. The punchy wireless subwoofer does a lot of the work. Bluetooth music streaming is onboard

★★★★★

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#227 ON SALE
Oct 17

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IFA uncovered: We report on the big home cinema stories from this year's tech expo

Music matters: On the hunt for hi-res audio

→ ON TEST

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POINT OF VIEW

Richard Stevenson takes his home cinema out of the house once again – and learns that you can get a highly enjoyable experience without it being 'high-end'

HAVING A GROUP of friends who know you love a challenge is not always a good thing. When they hatched the idea of getting together to watch *The Hobbit: An Unexpected Journey* on Blu-ray, the warm weather inspired a suggestion of *al fresco* cinema. Regular readers will know this isn't the first time I have tried outdoor movie-watching, but this time I was cajoled into making it bigger and louder.

The poor fiscal state of the nation meant taking my regular JVC projector out of the viewing room and using my existing 2.1 outdoor speaker setup (yes, I have one of those). The sound system itself is not exactly 'high-end', consisting of an elderly Sony AV processor, second-hand Rotel RB1080 power amp and a bridged ProSound 1600 (Maplins' finest) amp. The Rotel drives a pair of Acoustic Energy Extreme 8 outdoor speakers; the ProSound tickles a Boston Acoustics Voyager 12 under-decking subwoofer. Sadly, the sub voice coil got fried at a previous party and a replacement driver was no longer available. I found a beast of a 'dual voice coil' Pioneer driver from the in-car industry and wired its two 4ohm coils in series to get a domestic amp-friendly 8ohms. Fitted in the Boston enclosure it seriously rocks, making the original driver sound delicate and 'hi-fi' by comparison.

So how did I go 5.1? I didn't. Radical, I know. I decided good 2.1 was probably better than cobbling together centre and surround channels with the unmatched and low-quality spare amps and speakers kicking around the house. And none of those are waterproof and this is Britain, after all. Goblins would not be attacking from behind the seating area but you can't have everything.

For my last cinema 'outing' the screen was a 4:3-ratio 80in business screen mounted on a tripod. This time I wanted to go larger, and at 2.35:1. I found

a suitable projector cloth material at 1.5m wide and ordered 3.5m in length. That is 4.10m of diagonal viewing area for less than £40. An absolute bargain.

Getting cinema screens stretched and crease-free is a nightmare so I plumped for a high-tech approach; gaffer-taping the upper edge to a scaffold pole and weighting the bottom edge with a timber baton. Yes, there was a bit of curl-in on the sides but the bulk of the acreage was flat enough.

Singing in the rain

And so to the evening: half-a-dozen friends, doner kebabs, beer and wine and a late-night Hobbit adventure. It was fantastic. A great film, superb VFX and deep, deep bass rumbling through the decking structure. Of course, my pals bemoaned the lack of surround sound but when the movie ended the crowd called for more. Cue *Life of Brian*, and after that film's end credits we delivered a rousing rendition of *...The Bright Side of Life* with the local sheep whistling along with the chorus.

I've learnt many lessons from this experience, not least that you should get your PJ's image set up accurately before you start drinking. I've also decided that next time I will employ a centre speaker for crisper dialogue and investigate adding rear speakers for surround effects. Other issues include the decking vibration from my revamped subwoofer wobbling the PJ and blurring the image, rain doing strange optical things to the screen and being bitten by every mosquito in Sussex.

But the most important thing I've learned is that home cinema is what you make of it. You don't always need a high-quality setup to enjoy yourself – just sound, vision and a good movie ■

*Have you ever enjoyed home cinema outdoors?
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Richard Stevenson's outdoor cinema setup is available for hire – interested parties just need to provide a very long plug



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5.1 system



For over 50 years Quad Electroacoustics has produced the most accurate and neutral loudspeakers in the world. The L-ite Plus Series represents the latest evolution of the highly acclaimed Quad electrodynamic series. Redesigned and re-engineered using the most up to date materials and processes, these new evocations of our design philosophy achieve levels of detail, clarity and perspective that will be a revelation and source of continuing delight to all music lovers.

L-ite Plus loudspeakers may be used in Stereo or Home Theatre systems or in conjunction with components from the Quad L range in multi-channel applications. However you use them, the style is impeccably and uniquely Quad and one which will be welcomed by audiophiles who value the clear natural sound that is the hallmark of all Quad products.